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# Cosmopolitical Economy: Exchangeable Value and National Development in Adam Smith and Maria Edgeworth

All constitutions of government . . . are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them.

—*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.

—*The Wealth of Nations*

IS CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY, AS DEVELOPED AND EXPUNDED BY Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, a mode of imperialism? Recent work by Katie Trumpener and others points us in just such a direction. Trumpener, for example, argues, with respect to the English colonization of the Celtic periphery of Britain, that imperial governance and movements for economic modernization went hand in hand in practice, and as matters of policy, and were reflected as such in the cultural debates surrounding a range of political positions in Scotland, Ireland, and England.<sup>1</sup> It is my contention, however, that an even stronger argument can be made:

Part of this paper was presented under the title of “Imperial Value, or Political Economy” at the Literary Studies Colloquium on Value in Comparative and Interdisciplinary Perspectives at Fordham University (Lincoln Center Campus) in May 2000. I would like to thank the organizers of this colloquium, especially Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Christopher GoGwilt, and its participants, including Janet R. Jakobsen and Susan C. Greenfield. I would also like to thank Ed Hundert and Michael C. Howard for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).

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imperial governance and economic modernization go hand in hand on a more general level than the mere practicalities of imperial relations and the modes of national representation such as the survey or the tour that those practicalities give rise to; they go hand in hand in the very principles of Smithian economics as such—even, ultimately, in Smith's notion of exchange. Like other participants in the Scottish Enlightenment, Smith subscribes to notions of social and cultural development; indeed, he frequently draws on what he considers to be the barbarism and relative underdevelopment of the Scottish highlands for examples of the social forms preceding modern English society. But what drives these larger social and cultural developments is, for Smith, the degree to which free commercial relations have been allowed to prevail over other, particularly feudal, forms. The expansion of the means of subsistence by way of the freedom of individuals to engage in voluntary acts of exchange is the very hallmark, for Smith, of modern society, and nations are to be found in hierarchical social and political relationships with each other above all because they are at different stages of a common development toward commercial liberty.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite the considerable reach of Smith's theory of exchange, his importance to the *political* dimensions of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century literature has not received the critical attention it deserves.<sup>3</sup> Literary critics, social historians, and political theorists have focused, naturally enough, on the cultural and social implications of the great political texts of the late eighteenth century, especially the works of Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin.<sup>4</sup> In the study of Jane Austen, for example, influential interpretations of the social meaning of her novels by Marilyn Butler and Claudia

2. The "cosmic" or world-historical implications of Smith's ideas are economic: *The Wealth of Nations* is a theory of the creation of prosperity, not of moral cultivation or the emergence of world government. Still, the transnational prosperity that Smith describes does have properly political implications, and the present essay attempts to determine them. For an introduction to the rather different issues of human and political universality raised by Kant's cosmopolitics, see Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998).

3. For an overview of recent scholarship on Smith's understanding of political economy as a branch of the science of the legislator, see Richard F. Teichgraber III, "Adam Smith and Tradition: The *Wealth of Nations* before Malthus," in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young, eds., *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 86 and *passim*. There is, of course, an extensive critical literature on literary treatments of Smithian concepts of history and value: see, for example, Kathryn Sutherland, "Fictional Economies: Adam Smith, Walter Scott, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel," *ELH* 54 (1987): 97–127; and James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996).

4. Trumpener is a notable exception; but her focus is on the economic texts of secondary and directly imperial figures such as Samuel Johnson and Arthur Young.

Johnson have concentrated on her relationship to Jacobin and anti-Jacobin tendencies in English literature after 1790.<sup>5</sup> Yet Smith's great economic text was at least as influential on cultural and social questions at the time, and perhaps more influential over time, than the explicitly political texts that followed it. Creative writers from William Wordsworth to Charles Dickens took clear positions on the premises of political economy as presented by Smith, his defenders, and his inheritors. Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, for example, are both, broadly speaking, conservative thinkers, but whereas Austen resisted Smithian ideas, Edgeworth promoted them.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, many of those who vehemently disagreed over such political issues as the perfectibility of society or the morality of monarchy concurred on the need to surmount the inheritance of "Gothic customary" and modernize the British economy along broadly Smithian lines.<sup>7</sup> These examples illustrate that, in Britain circa 1800, advocacy of economic modernization in no way entailed advocacy of political modernization, and adherents and opponents of Smith could be found among both progressives and conservatives. As a result, simple dichotomies of Painite versus Burkean or radical versus conservative fall well short of addressing the range of social positions actually engaged by the literature of the early nineteenth century. To do justice to this range, it is essential to foreground the political implications of Smith's economic ideas and to examine how they served as a distinct locus for the theorization of domestic politics and social relations by those writing after 1776.

For Irish writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, it was Smith's belief that commercial transactions between nations could ameliorate the social and material inequities of a colonial system that was key. Significantly, the benefits of international trade are defined by Smith from the perspective of commerce itself, and imply a convergence among trading nations towards the commercial stage of society. By the early nineteenth century such a view of international commerce had come under attack. Smith's ideas were seen, for example, as entailing a "cosmopolitical economy" (in Friedrich List's phrase) in which a regime of international free trade would lead to *de facto* British hegemony over any less-developed

5. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975); Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

6. Fraser Easton, "The Political Economy of *Mansfield Park*: Fanny Price and the Atlantic Working Class," *Textual Practice* 12 (1998): 460–61; Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 124.

7. *Gothic customary* is John Thelwall's phrase, cited in E. P. Thompson, "Hunting the Jacobin Fox," *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 123; on Godwin's embrace of the premises of political economy, see Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 440; the radical Godwin was the main target of the conservative political economist Thomas Malthus.

trading partners—a situation described by others in a later formulation as “free trade imperialism.”<sup>8</sup> Edgeworth, in contrast, appears to have feared no such hegemony, agreeing with Smith rather than his critics that trade could be an instrument of equality between nations regardless of differences in material development. In her fictions of Irish society and Irish-English national relations Edgeworth freely adapts the ideas of exchange and productivity from which Smith’s cosmopolitical thought derives. It seems odd, then, that the full measure of Edgeworth’s relationship to Smith’s cosmopolitics has yet to be taken.

One reason for this neglect, of course, is the powerful example of Burke, who has stood as the pole star to considerations of Edgeworth’s national ideas. In an important recent reading of Edgeworth in the tradition of Irish writing, Seamus Deane relates her Irish novels to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates about the reform of national character that flowed from Burke’s analysis of the French and English national characters in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edgeworth participated in these debates, according to Deane, by presenting the exotic foreign terrain of Ireland as effectively (re)conquered by an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy acting in the name of the pragmatic necessities of a national modernization. Deane adds, however, that

... the ‘utilitarian’ rationality that she sponsors has both a normalizing and a disenchanting effect. In its ambition to produce prosperity out of poverty, it might also produce uniformity out of difference; it might threaten tradition by erasing its irrational and unproductive practices—the very identifying features of Irish ‘tradition.’<sup>9</sup>

This is a perceptive account of a key paradox in Edgeworth’s work, one that clearly marks the tension in her writing between a needed reform of Irish economic life and the possible loss of Irish national characteristics. But this paradox is less original to Edgeworth or to others writing in the wake of Burke than it may at first seem. On the contrary: the equation of economic development and cultural homogeneity derives directly from *The Wealth of Nations* and Smith’s codification of political economy.

It is true that the disenchantment mourned by Edgeworth was celebrated by the cosmopolitical Smith, who viewed it as a necessary and welcome, not merely possible, outcome of economic development, but the fact remains that the paradox enters Edgeworth’s work through her appropriation of Smith.<sup>10</sup> Edgeworth finds in Smith an alternative view of the history of

8. Cited in Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 162 and 161, n. 77.

9. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 30.

10. On Edgeworth’s knowledge of Smith, see Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 76 and *passim*.

national cultures to the one offered by Burke, a view that anticipates the historical materialism of Karl Marx more than the historical romance of Walter Scott. Of course, the general relevance of Smithian ideas to Edgeworth has been broached before. Marilyn Butler in particular has persuasively argued that *The Wealth of Nations* provides a model for the literary treatment of colonial psychology by writers such as Edgeworth via its analysis of the dependency relations between unproductive aristocrats and their retainers.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Butler has traced the provenance of Edgeworth's ideas on education to Scottish thinkers such as Smith.<sup>12</sup> My concern in this paper, however, is with how Smith's thought shapes the cosmopolitical—and not just psychological or social—vision of Edgeworth's novels. I will argue that the Smithian paradigm of value, which Edgeworth follows so religiously in her work, is fundamentally an imperial paradigm, one that legitimates a presumptive hierarchy of nations headed by Britain. To contextualize properly the colonial and imperial dimensions of Edgeworth's national tales, then, I will turn first to a description and analysis of the cosmopolitical dimensions of Adam Smith's economic doctrine.

#### African Kings and European Peasants: Smith on Exchange

*The Wealth of Nations* opens with the paradox that the hardest working societies are not necessarily the wealthiest ones.<sup>13</sup> Smith argues that [a]mong “the savage nations of hunters and fishers,” where everyone who is able to do so must work and work hard, people are “miserably poor,” whereas in “civilized and thriving nations,” in which many of those who are able to work do not do so and instead live luxuriously at the expense of others, “a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order . . . may enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life than it is possible for any savage to acquire.”<sup>14</sup> From the very outset of his study, Smith emphasizes this triangulation between degrees of wealth, modes of labor, and forms of society. The notion that differential labor outcomes are associated with different forms of society helps Smith to support several claims, including the hypothesis that the members of the poorest classes in modern societies may be materially better off than the wealthiest individual in a “savage” or

11. Marilyn Butler, “Introduction,” in Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, ed. Butler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 29–31.

12. Marilyn Butler, “Irish Culture and Scottish Enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth's Histories of the Future,” in Collini *et al.*, eds., *Economy, Polity, and Society* 158–180.

13. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff examine this “paradox of commercial society” (their emphasis) in “Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*: An Introductory Essay,” in Hont and Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 2.

14. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 8, 9. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

hunter-gatherer society. Because it leads to general opulence, among other advantages, the historical development from hunter-gatherer to commercial society is for Smith a positive good, both for a society as a whole and for its poorest members. There is of course an ethnocentric dimension to Smith's wealth-based measure of the differences between societies, given that his idea of national opulence is inspired by European examples; but the measure also has a universal aspect, since Smith assumes that all societies may eventually come to enjoy the benefits of commerce—not, it should be said, for the gratification of Europeans, but because “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable” (78).<sup>15</sup> We will need to interpret this notion of universal economic progress carefully, of course: Smith's point is not that the well-to-do within a society are likely to be *morally* concerned if the nation-at-large is poor (although perhaps they should be); rather, they too will be materially less well off when laborers are poor. *The Wealth of Nations* thus presents the material happiness of the lower orders of a society, in the form of high wages, as a necessary precondition for the material happiness of that society as a whole. But the paradox remains: how is it possible for less labor to produce more wealth?

According to Smith, the explanation of this paradox lies first of all in the familiar principle of “the division of labour,” a process which, by multiplying “the productions of all the different arts . . . occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people” (18). Smith uses the example of pin-making: where one person can make up to 20 pins a day, ten people, by dividing and perfecting the labor between them, can each make the equivalent of 4,800 pins a day (12–13). Opulence, then, is an outcome of the activities of productive laborers and the productive powers (such as “machinery” [16] and technical processes) that are employed by those laborers. Personal wealth measures our access to the overall pool of this production; it is our purchasing power over either labor directly or the produce of labor. To the extent that a particular commodity requires less labor to produce, it will be cheaper to buy. As a consequence,

The word VALUE . . . has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the

15. Not all misery is a result of poverty, of course. Smith recognizes the limits of commercial society—for example, by describing the narrowing effect of the division of labor on the human personality. But if some members of commercial societies are unactualized and unhappy, this can be mitigated (for example, through the provision of education to counteract the “drowsy stupidity” [430] to which the specialized workers of commercial societies are prone).

power of purchasing other goods which the possession of the object conveys. (34)

Water may be useful, but it has no exchange value on that account, whereas a diamond “has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it” (35). The point of Smith’s paradox of value is that, truly judged, value inheres in the measure of production—that is, labor—rather than utility. “Labour,” Smith writes, “is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities” (36). Diamonds are expensive not because they are useful but because they are rare and hard to produce, and the market will normally value them accordingly.

Yet if labor is the real measure of exchangeable value, those values are not set in the act of labor as such, but through the social interaction of exchange. We can labor and produce all we want by ourselves, but it is only in an act of exchange that our labor is made real and represented for others.<sup>16</sup> It is exchangeable value, then, that drives economic relations between people. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner,” Smith writes in a memorable formulation, “but from their regard to their own interest” (22). In return for their meat, beer, and bread, the butcher, brewer, and baker demand a *quid pro quo*; they expect to exchange their produce based on a shared measure of its value, that is, not give it away. It is true that Smith is an optimist with regard to market mechanisms and the social relations around markets and the labor process, as long as interfering men of power will stand aside and allow for free exchange. When “[a]ll systems either of preference or of restraint” are removed from a market, Smith believes that “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord” (391). But his theory of exchange involves more than markets—that is, more than the efficiency and equitability of the distribution of produce—and indeed properly speaking precedes them. Smith very clearly presents exchange as the motor force behind the division of labor, and thus, by implication, behind the rise of opulence in a society:

[The] division of labour . . . is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature . . . the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. (21)

16. Compare Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the question of value, most recently in “From Haverstock Hill Flat to U. S. Classroom: What’s Left of Theory?” in Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *What’s Left of Theory?: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 3. What the present analysis of Smith shares with Spivak’s reading of Marx is an awareness of the always already social—because representational—nature of the value form.



By supporting the division of labor, the human propensity to exchange leads naturally and necessarily (as Smith might put it) to improved productivity. When the output of a unit of labor or productivity increases, and with it the number of goods that can be purchased with such a unit, it allows the members of a society to fulfil more effectively, through exchange, the natural “desire of bettering our condition” that “comes with us from the womb” (203).<sup>17</sup> “[I]mprovement,” then, as Smith terms advances in “the productive powers of labour” (11), is a direct outcome of the human propensity to set values on things through the historically-conditioned process of exchanging them.

By encouraging specialization and the division of labor, exchange initiates and propels a cycle of increasing national wealth that has the effect of differentiating societies both in time, and, at a particular time, from each other.<sup>18</sup> Smith’s vocabulary for the differentiation that he associates with this “natural Progress of Opulence” (227) is highly charged: “savage” societies are not only “poor” (8) and “barbarous” (406), they are “rude” (13), backward or “early” (45), and subject to “ignorance,” “violence and disorder” (456), whereas “commercial” (431) societies, in addition to “thriving” and being “civilized” (8), are “improved” (13), “advanced” (45), and “industrious” (308), as well as more liberal and more secure (260). Smith is sensitive enough to see that not all social development is for the better: savage “independency” (229), for example, is lost with the rise of “frivolous” (457) consumerism. Such qualifications aside, however, the vocabulary attached to Smith’s social schemata is the natural consequence of a method of social comparison in which the historical development of societies is described using terms and concepts drawn from contemporary cross-cultural observation.<sup>19</sup> This method invites the transfer of a set of eighteenth-

17. Hont and Ignatieff place this dimension of Smith’s argument in relation to his “denying that the poor’s needs constituted a claim of right against the property of the rich” (“Needs and Justice” 25); my interest here lies with its implications for the rights of societies.

18. Scholars of Smith sometimes argue that the four stages of society are only contingently, not necessarily, related, and that Smith only makes claims of causation *within* the system of a particular stage. See, for example, Alexander Brodie, ed., *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997) 475. Yet evidence for a developmental sequence of social stages can be found at several places in Smith: in *The Wealth of Nations* developments in the relations of exchange very clearly lead to transitions between social systems (as considered below), while in the *Lectures in Jurisprudence*, it is scarcity that triggers such shifts (for example, “as their numbers multiplied” a group of hunters “would find the chase too precarious for their support. They would be necessitated to contrive some other method whereby to support themselves. . . . Hence would arise the age of shepherds” [cited in Brodie, ed., *Scottish Enlightenment* 479]).

19. Kathryn Sutherland gives a concise account of the ways in which Smith’s method of social comparison shifts between historical and contemporary bases of argument in the notes to her edition of *The Wealth of Nations* 535–36.

century European attitudes about other cultures—forged in the crucible of colonial and imperial conquest—to judgments of historical change.

One such transference seems especially important in accounting for Smith's presentation of European commercial society as a near-Utopian advance over other social forms:

the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages. (20)

The self-evidence of this vignette depends on several overt Euro- and Britocentric prejudices: the assumed opulence of the frugal European peasant and the poverty of the African king; the advantage of the meanest rags to bare, unaccommodated nakedness (even in the tropics); the worthlessness of social status compared with valuable material goods; and the association of despotism (the African king is “the absolute master” of his subjects) and poverty (his subjects, though numerous—a condition elsewhere linked by Smith [e.g., 80] with wealth—are “naked” or poor). Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff place this passage in the context of Smith's defense of the strict justice of a commercial society like England, which ameliorates the condition of the poor in society not by way of a right to the property of the wealthy, but through a natural cycle of increasing national wealth (“Needs and Justice” 1–2). Smith certainly does defend the “security” (260) made possible by commercial society, but his example of an African ruler serves other purposes as well. As long as the poverty of an African king is taken for granted, Smith is able, in his discussion of the advantages of commerce, to shift the reader's attention away from the wealth of European princes and other members of the upper ranks and towards the comparative wealth of whole European societies or “nations” instead.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from such *overt* prejudices, however, there is also a *covert* prejudice of great consequence entailed by Smith's story of an African prince and a European pauper. Smith implies that, in commercial societies at least, our humanity is best realized *not* in labor (essentially a mechanical power) or in consumption (essentially an animal capacity), but in exchange.<sup>21</sup> Coming to

20. Thomas Malthus thought that Smith may have confused two enquiries, one into the wealth of nations, the other into the wealth of “the lower orders of society”; in any event, Malthus does not find it difficult to present cases where increases in the wealth of a society have *not* been transmitted to “the labouring part of it.” Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 124. If Malthus is correct, Smith's reliance on colonial and racial stereotypes would further this confusion by deflecting questions on the distribution of wealth within commercial societies.

21. Labor is essentially mechanical, according to Smith, because it can be divided, mecha-

*The Wealth of Nations* in the wake of Marx's critique of exchange, as we do today, we may be inclined to gloss over this dimension of Smith's argument.<sup>22</sup> Marx certainly shares Smith's concern with the dehumanizing potential of the division of labor in commercial society; indeed, in *The German Ideology* he goes so far as to imagine the future reintegration and aestheticization of work:

in communist society . . . nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes . . . to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 160)

But Smith never proposes that future social development will lead to the reintegration or rehumanization of work. Instead, unlike Marx (at least as Marx is usually interpreted), Smith makes relations of exchange, not labor, foundational to both civilized sociality *and* human self-actualization.<sup>23</sup> For Smith, the modes of exchange supported by commercial society, such as treaties, contracts, and purchases, are all channels for the expression of what Donald Winch describes as a "unique human capacity": the ability "to persuade others to collaborate in satisfying wants" (*Riches and Poverty* 70).

Exchange, in other words, is linked directly by Smith to "the faculties of speech and reason," and just as we have never seen an animal speaking or reasoning, "Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange

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nized, and so on. Moreover, the talents of a skillful laborer are a kind of mechanical power: "The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labour. . ." (166).

22. For Marx, exchange-value is the measure of the congealed, abstract human labor in commodities (that is, items "produced directly for exchange") that appears when the use-value and material specificity of the commodity (and the specificity of the labor involved in its production) are factored out; as a consequence, "all commodities, when taken in certain proportions, must be equal in value." Unlike Smith, however, Marx sees exchange relations as a zone of alienation, fetishism, and exploitation. Exchange does not simply measure labor, it reflects the social relations that surround production: "Exchange in all its moments thus appears as either directly comprised in production or determined by it." Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978) 328, 311, and 236.

23. The usual understanding of Marx on exchange is, however, criticized by Gayatri Spivak, who argues, uncommonly, that with regard to the analysis of the value form in *Capital*, "Marx is teaching the worker the counter-intuitive lesson that the complicity of use- and exchange-value shows that the private is measured by and contains within it the possibility of the social." *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999) 178. She overlooks, however, the possibility that Marx may have derived this lesson from his reading of Smith ("From Haverstock Hill Flat" 22).

of one bone for another with another dog” (21). Unfortunately, *like* dogs, humans too will court the despotic favor of those who can provide a good:

When an animal wants to obtain something either of a man or of another animal, it has no other means of persuasion but to gain the favour of those whose service it requires. . . . Man sometimes uses the same arts with his brethren, and . . . endeavours by every servile and fawning attention to obtain their good will. (21–22)

At a stroke—and before developing the comparative sociological claims that are elsewhere so central to his argument—Smith in this passage links pastoral and feudal interdependence with a dog-like servility. Under social systems such as these, where men must often engage the favor of the rich and powerful in order to better their condition, Smith asks us to believe that individuals will be led to act towards their superiors like a “puppy” to “its dam” or a “spaniel” to “its master” (21). This deformation of human potential contrasts sharply, according to Smith, with commercial social conditions, where individuals will be free, in a well-governed state, to maximize the nature and number of exchanges of goods that they make with each other.

For Smith, then, the inhabitants of savage society are dehumanized, not merely “indigent” (cited in Winch 61), because they tend to consume the produce of their own labor (or, in the feudal stage, that of others), without first having entered into the uniquely human relationship of exchange. The societies in which they live are, in effect, a desert, at least of a properly human sociability:

In the lone houses and very small villages which are scattered about in so desert a country as the Highlands of Scotland, every farmer must be butcher, baker and brewer for his own family. (26)

It is true that such farmers are more skilled than many a modern specialized laborer would be, making them both economically independent and more fully actualized through the humane variety of their labor. Smith comments at various points in *The Wealth of Nations* on the “superior” “understanding” (127) of those who, like a savage hunter or rural ploughman, engage in a variety of tasks as a part of their occupation, and he contrasts this superior understanding with the “drowsy stupidity” (430) of the specialized workers who predominate in a commercial society. Smith is also clear, however, that the humanity of the “savage” or “barbaric” individual is considerably less actualized in other ways—in terms of productive powers, for example, or in terms of security and natural liberty. As we have seen, a feudal retainer is more likely to solicit or offer a favor than to engage in an act of exchange. Indeed, it was in part to break up such traditional relations

of feudal dependency (and interdependency) that the British parliament imposed its cruel policy on the Scottish Highlands after the '45.

It may be objected that what Smith really intends with his theory of exchange is to describe a shift in the *locus* of human actualization in economic affairs from labor and status (in agricultural and earlier societies) to capital and exchange (in commercial society). Yet despite these historical implications, Smith goes out of his way to underscore the primordialness of exchange in general. Although the link between exchange and the division of labor may be best realized in modern commercial societies, Smith sees it playing a role in all societies, beginning with the nations of hunters and shepherds:

In a tribe of hunters or shepherds a particular person makes bows and arrows, for example, with more readiness and dexterity than any other. He frequently exchanges them for cattle or for venison with his companions; and he finds at last that he can in this manner get more cattle and venison, than if he himself went to the field to catch them. From a regard to his own interest, therefore, the making of bows and arrows grows to be his chief business, and he becomes a sort of armourer. (23)

In the context of Smith's conjectural history of societies, then, the liberation of exchange follows a pattern in which man returns to his true nature, in the course of human history, as his capacity as an exchanging creature is more and more fully actualized—culminating with, but not limited to, the rise of modern-day commercial society.

Exchange, then, makes possible a mode of sociality—Smith calls it commerce—that is both a manifestation and fulfilment of an aspect of human nature *and* a marker of the material advancement that differentiates societies. Individuals have a natural propensity to exchange, but unlike the desire to better ourselves, which “comes with us from the womb” (203) and can be fulfilled in different ways in different social systems (for example, by seeking favor in a feudal society), opportunities for the *cultivation* of exchange are a properly historical development. The implication is clear: the underdevelopment of exchange relations among members of traditional societies not only impairs their wealth and usefulness to each other, but a part of their humanity as well. Smith drives this point home rhetorically when he juxtaposes the naked African subject of an “absolute master” (20) at the end of Chapter 1, Book 1 of *The Wealth of Nations* with a dog fawning upon “its master” (21) at the start of Chapter 2. Absent the unleashing of exchange, the humanity of both African king and African subject would seem, in Smith's neo-colonial view, to remain un- or underdeveloped.

Smith is not arguing that the human nature of a savage is different from that of a civilized individual. On the contrary: human nature is constant

behind its historical articulations, and where a savage, barbaric or feudal society exists in the present day, the way is open for a tutorial relationship between nations (as embodied in their markets): “Commerce . . . ought naturally to be, among nations, as among individuals, a bond of union and friendship. . .” (306). To barter is to enter into a social bond that by its very nature will, if left free of extraneous political interference, take a commercial form. To promote such relations between nations is to posit that commercial societies may communicate their social as well as economic advantages to nations at an earlier stage of development. Thus Smith’s remarks on the security and substantial freedom of industry in Great Britain (336–37) function as examples for the conduct of commerce in less developed nations and, importantly, for reforming the colonial trade between England and its political empire. Indeed, having criticized the existing system of protected trade with the North American colonies, Smith defends an alternative vision of empire based not on political conquest but on the ameliorative economic forces of enlarged markets.<sup>24</sup> The elimination of political interference in the commercial bond between nations does not mean that such a bond is extra-political. This is signalled by Smith’s use of the word “union” in describing the nature of such bonds, thereby invoking the Union of England and Scotland in 1707. At the conclusion of Book 5 of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith draws more explicitly on Scotland’s earlier experience to recommend a union with Britain as a nostrum for Ireland’s social as well as economic exploitation. Since many English saw the Irish as little more than inhuman savages—a prejudice that was a key stimulus for the novels of Edgeworth and Owenson—Smith’s recommendation was a radical one.

Smith’s views on union had practical consequences: subsequent generations of Irish political and commercial leaders, including the Edgeworths, supported the actual union of Ireland and Britain in 1801 in part because of his arguments. On the one hand, Smith proposes union as a means to deliver Ireland from an “oppressive aristocracy” based on “the most odious of all distinctions, those of religious and political prejudices” (461), while, on the other hand, his recommendation promotes an English model for Irish economic and social development under the guise of a universal vector of development. Behind Smith’s council of union with Ireland, then, is the premise of a quasi-imperial economic hierarchy and tutorial relationship. The legacy of *The Wealth of Nations* involves both a criticism of the existing system of colonial governance (on political and economic grounds) *and* the

24. Exchange drives prosperity, and social development more generally, while enlarged markets increase opportunities for exchange. This argument is the heart of Smith’s rationale for *laissez faire*. List’s criticism is that enlarged markets most benefit those societies able to take advantage of them—that is, societies whose markets, capital, and productive powers are already primed.

acceptance of a new mode of imperial hegemony, one grounded not in national character (as Burke might have argued) but in the cosmopolitical order of exchange.<sup>25</sup>

Economic improvement, then, as presented by Smith, entails a degree of political and social improvement (although some things are lost, too), and on balance, according to Smith, these political and social improvements are morally as well as materially desirable for all societies. In the context of European feudalism, for example, Smith writes that it was not political development as such, but “commerce and manufactures” that “gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals . . .” (260). Burke, in contrast, whatever strategic support for the propertied interests he may have found in Smith’s ideas in the death year of 1795, took a diametrically opposed stance on the question of commercial liberation, seeing commerce as the expression of a constitutional and cultural, that is a political and national, growth.<sup>26</sup> For Smith, however, when a society is richer it is also juster: the expansion of individual liberties of property, security, and commerce (although not political freedom in the sense of democratic participation) take their origin from the expansion of free exchange necessary for the encouragement of the division of labor and the rise of opulence in a society. Despite his comfort with regal government, Smith strikes a Painite note often enough—for example, when he links the use of entails to keep property within a noble family with the “usurped” and “unjust advantage” of “great offices and honours” (235).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, relations of “servile dependency” (260), whether associated with pre-commercial societies or not, are a target of Smith’s scorn not only for economic but for moral reasons.

To see how Smith imagines the role of exchange in the historical transition between social stages, we can look more closely at a particular case. In medieval Europe, political relations of dependency between baron and tenant derived from the underdevelopment of commerce. Surplus agricultural

25. On Burke and Irish development, see Deane, *Strange Country* 27–28 and *passim*.

26. “Even commerce, and trade, and manufacture, the gods of our oeconomical politicians, are themselves perhaps but creatures; are themselves effects, which, as first causes, we choose to worship. They certainly grew under the same shade [of “ancient manners”] in which learning flourished.” Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 79. As Coleridge observed, looking back on Smith, political economy tended to “denationalise mankind” (cited in Winch, *Riches and Poverty* 398).

27. For Paine, “If commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable of, it would extirpate the system of war, and produce a revolution in the uncivilized state of governments” (cited in Winch 129). Smith himself saw no such one-to-one link between economic and political modernization, but he did advocate some very un-Burkean political supports for commerce, including an end of primogeniture (Winch 184).

produce was consumed locally rather than exchanged outside the region, thereby materially underpinning a system of dependent hospitality for military retainers, menial servants, and tenants alike based on the favor of the local lord. Feudalism proper, according to Smith, like the royal charters of towns, was a political attempt by the monarch to reduce the power of such allodial lords. Famously, Smith makes the successful reduction of the allodial lords by the sovereign an unintended consequence of the diffusion of trade over a period of many centuries:

what all the violence of the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about. (264)

With the greater development of foreign trade, these independent barons discovered and became the enamoured consumers of “trinkets and baubles” (267) that they could purchase from dealers in luxury goods, with the result that over time they spent less on retainers and servants, and so reduced their independent base of power. The social position of the producers of these goods underwent a corresponding development. As markets expanded, artificers found that they had many customers, so that although any single great proprietor “contributes . . . to the maintenance of them all, they are all more or less independent of him. . .” (265). Independence, of course, is a moral good for Smith, as his support elsewhere in *The Wealth of Nations* for the values of pastoral republicanism (127, 229) confirms.

By moralizing exchange practices and their outcomes, Smith not only bases social improvement on productive improvement; he moralizes commercial society as such. Such a society may not be virtuous in all of its actions, but it is happy in its overall prosperity. The savagery of the savage, with its good as well as bad aspects, is not a consequence of race, religion, culture, custom, nationality, or locale—causes that a Burkean might point to—but of the underdevelopment of exchange. Such a social and political lack is not to be addressed through culture or national identity as such, but through the provision of enlarged opportunities (i.e., markets) for commerce. Only in this way can African kings hope to live as well as European peasants, and African peasants hope to be independent. In practice if a “naked savage” or European peasant did not care to trade, his or her resistance was met by force (Smith himself was an optimist: he expected the innate desire to better oneself to surmount, over time, the resistance of social habits). The effect of Smith’s moralizing is to make commercial relations the end of history—and of relations between national powers. Unlike Kant, Smith does not forecast the emergence of a supra-national world government, nor does he present commercial life as an unmixed blessing—it is exchange, after all, that is the origin and motor of the division of labor and its



dehumanizing effects.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, because the stadial theory of history in *The Wealth of Nations* is based on the idea of an innate human propensity for exchange, Smith's political economy legitimates an imperial mandate in which contemporary British society is the measure of, and relations of trade the means to, the "improvement" of other nations. Despite qualifying the ethical progress represented by commercial society, Smith accepts, as a matter of international "friendship" (306), the right of commercial nations to trade with unimproved societies, whose citizens, for their own material and political well-being, must be taught to *value* exchangeable value (rather than other abstract goods, such as honor, favor, national character, or non-commercial independence) appropriately.

### English Lords and Irish Peasants: Edgeworth on Development

For Maria Edgeworth, the perspective of political economy was a troubling one within which to frame the destiny of the Irish nation. On the one hand, it represented a clear prescription, or seemed to, for the actual material improvement of the lives of Irish individuals, including above all the Irish poor. Nationalist writers might argue that the Catholic inhabitants of Ireland embraced once and future Milesian kings, but it was in the present day an impoverished and, from a London perspective, savage-seeming population. For Edgeworth, Smith's theory opened a view of Irish economic improvement modeled on the existing commercial society of Britain. In this way spendthrift former kings could aspire to become "industrious and frugal" (20) peasants, and the wrongs of "oppressive aristocracy" (461) could be overcome for a cosmopolitan domain of commerce.<sup>29</sup> In *The Absentee*, for example, Edgeworth celebrates this cosmopolitanism by describing in positive terms the social ferment that followed Ireland's Union with Britain in 1801: when "commerce rose into the vacated seats of rank" in Dublin, she writes, there was an influx of "new life and energy, new talent, new ambition, a desire and a determination to improve and be improved" as a consequence.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, set against such economic success is the prospect that the Irish will in many respects cease to be Irish. With its post-Union commercialization, the remnants of the Irish cultural past and agrarian character will presumably fade away as their material underpinnings in residual feudal social forms and agricultural practices are eliminated. Yet for Edgeworth, the forms of Irish life have value in and of them-

28. On Kant, see Pheng Cheah, "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism," in Cheah and Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* 290–91.

29. As Trumpener notes, the prescriptions of political economy, applied to the class of landowners, provided an external measure of Anglo-Irish failings (*Bardic Nationalism* 50).

30. Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, ed. Heidi Thomson and Kim Walker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999) 80, 81. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

selves: *The Absentee*, for example, embraces the traditional hospitality of the Irish (e.g., 144) as an expression of the national moral values of warmth and decency, not simply as an attribute of pre-commercial subsistence relations. Even *Castle Rackrent*, with its hostile portrait of the improving Jason Quirk, is as much a comic elegy for, as a satire of, the counter-productive morés of the Rackrent family. It is in direct tension with the task of promoting Irish economic development, then, that Edgeworth seeks to justify Irish manners and customs to her London audience.

Yet despite this tension, Edgeworth's Irish novels—*Castle Rackrent*, *Ennui*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond*—all seek to defend the Irish national character within a cosmopolitical frame of reference. This defense generally follows a didactic pattern. In *Castle Rackrent* it is embodied in both the tale proper (for example, in the hostile response of Sir Kit's new wife to the sight of the family bog) and in the "Editor's" glossary that follows the tale, where many of the strange customs exhibited in the novel, including duty work and mourning customs such as the Whillaluh and the wake, are explained as the perfectly justifiable mores of a now-outdated traditional or feudalistic society.<sup>31</sup> In Edgeworth's other Irish works the didactic pattern is embodied within an overarching narrative of the social and economic education of the novel's protagonist. In *Ennui* the absentee landlord, the Earl of Glenthorn, leaves off a series of anti-Irish assumptions and prejudices by experiencing at first-hand the actual manners and values of his Irish dependents, and of Irish fashionable society. For Lord Colambre in *The Absentee*, an incognito journey to his father's estate in Ireland gives him the cultural knowledge that he needs to resist the negative English stereotypes of the Irish that have gripped his "Londonomaniacal" mother and blocked his family's return to (and the economic development of) their estate.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Harry Ormond, the propertyless hero of Edgeworth's last Irish novel, also receives a social and economic education, although, as an Irish resident, it is one based on his experience of contrasting social formations *within* Ireland (and, to a lesser extent, in old-regime France).

Didactic defenses of Irish mores and development were not of course limited to the promoters, like Edgeworth, of a renovated Protestant Ascendancy. *The Wild Irish Girl*, by the nationalist author Sydney Owen-son, uses much the same pattern of cultural education for more radical purposes: the English Horatio, banished to his family's Irish estate, writes extended reports in letters to a friend about his induction into the intricacies of Irish history, culture, and politics by Glorvina, his Gaelic love, and her

31. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, 77–78, 128–29, 124–27, 137–38. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

32. On the "Londonomania" (Edgeworth's emphasis) of Lady Clonbrony, see *The Absentee* 192.

father, the impoverished Prince of Inismore. Before going to Ireland, Horatio fully expects to encounter “that intemperate, cruel, idle savage, an Irish peasant,” the descendent of men reputed in the days of Queen Elizabeth to have been “frequently seen seated round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity.”<sup>33</sup> Calling the Irish peasant an “idle savage” is to charge him or her not only with incivility, but with a lack of labor discipline, and consequently of a proper role in economic improvement. Indeed, English bigotry mapped accusations of economic idleness directly onto a cosmopolitical and imperial schemata:

whenever the *Irish* were mentioned in my presence, an *Esquimaux* group circling round the fire which was to dress a dinner, or broil an enemy, was the image which presented itself to my mind. . . . (13)

These views are certainly exaggerated, with their hints of cannibalism; they are perhaps meant to be ironic and to undermine comically Horatio’s position. Yet comparisons of the Celtic periphery of the United Kingdom with foreign savagery were common and serious enough in this period: Samuel Johnson, to consider only one example, notoriously compared the pre-Union Scots to Esquimos—and to Hottentots (Trumpener 83). For Owenson, however, it is the English who are the real savages in Ireland: Horatio learns that an ancestor of his took possession of the bulk of the Inismore estate by simple violence, murdering the Prince of that age, while in the present day his father’s estate agent uses commercial deceit to alienate further lands from the current Prince (39).<sup>34</sup>

Centered on an equation of barbarity and imperial political conquest that would not, in fact, be all that alien to Smith’s critique of mercantilism, Owenson’s criticism of English colonization concludes with a marriage between Milesian and Anglo-Irish that models national union in a courtship allegory.<sup>35</sup> Yet although Owenson posits the commercial development of Ireland through the marriage of Catholic and Protestant, she breaks with the Smithian economism adapted by Edgeworth by imagining this development as a mutually transformative reciprocity: if acts of exchange may be an alibi of violence, rather than justice, relations of dependency turn out

33. Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan, The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 25, 13. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

34. Significantly, this agent details to Horatio “the ferocity, cruelty, and uncivilized state” (31) of the Irish, suggesting (contra Edgeworth) that Smithian ideas were directly serviceable in the legitimation of colonial rule.

35. For treatments of this allegory, see for example Mary Jean Corbett, “Public Affections and Familial Politics: Burke, Edgeworth, and the ‘Common Naturalization’ of Great Britain,” *ELH* 61 (1994): 877–97.

to have their own civility. Furthermore, Owenson's antiquarian approach to the heritage of down-at-the-heels Milesian lords such as the Prince of Inismore involves the elaboration not merely of a bardic inheritance (defined by Trumpener as an aesthetic or cultural quality), but of a material inheritance that includes a variety of precious goods of traditional Irish handicraft. Owenson appears to have in mind some of Smith's notions of feudal life, in particular his claim that the allodial barons who spent on things other than hospitality sealed their decline by importing foreign luxuries:

For a pair of diamond buckles [writes Smith] perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless . . . and thus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and the most sordid of all vanities, they gradually bartered their whole power and authority. (264)

Rather than a mean and sordid personal vanity, however, in *The Wild Irish Girl* Glorvina's jewelry represents a national, as well as familial, inheritance that is defined in terms of local socio-economic relationships. Locally produced handicraft goods like the luxuries of Inismore are presented as growing out of feudal social relations, rather than despite them. In this way Owenson counters the Smithian moralization of exchange.

In contrast to Owenson, Edgeworth was a consistent propagandist for the lessons of political economy. Like other writers of the national tale, Edgeworth presents a rich account of Irish mores and culture to target English ignorance, but the anticolonial aspect of her novels, like her defense of Ascendency landowners, is secondary to the promotion of Irish prosperity according to the theory of Adam Smith.<sup>36</sup> In *Castle Rackrent*, for example, Edgeworth follows Smith closely when she excoriates a range of feudal customs and perks (Thelwall's "Gothic customary")—such as duty fowls, weed ashes, and sealing money—that restrain the free exchange of labor. In *Ennui* she presents a panoply of Smithian concerns, including the social and economic disadvantages of unimproving absentee proprietors (and of their uninformed economic interventions), the figure of a tendentious Scots estate agent who insists on quoting to Lord Glenthorn from *The Wealth of Nations*, and a reiteration of the attacks in *Castle Rackrent* on feudal customs (including the despotic habits of rule that they are supposed to encourage, habits to which Glenthorn temporarily succumbs).

Most tellingly, in *Ennui*, Edgeworth follows Smith's views on exchange when she presents the Earl of Glenthorn's ennui or want of a want as effectively dehumanizing him. Glenthorn shares this lack of a want with his

36. On the anticolonial imperative of the national tale, see Trumpener 142 and *passim*; on Edgeworth's defense of Ascendency landowners, see Meredith Cary, "Privileged Assimilation: Maria Edgeworth's Hope for the Ascendency," *Eire-Ireland* 26 (1991): 29–37.

“savage” (200) former Irish nurse, Ellinor, who fails to desire properly a modern-style house that is built for her.<sup>37</sup> As Julie Costello points out, the obligation that Glenthorn feels to Ellinor (and attempts to redeem with his gift) corresponds to a colonial anxiety over assimilation into a native population.<sup>38</sup> But these obligations are also extra-commercial, and represent a mode of interdependence appropriate to childhood, the childhood of man, or the childish Irish, but not to modern commercial society. We are reminded, perhaps, of Smith’s representation of the servility of a “puppy” to “its dam” (21). Trucking, bartering, and exchanging are really only natural to the extent that fungible gain is desired (and a taste for luxury exists). Whereas Smith believed in a “uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort [on the part] of every man to better his condition . . .” (205) among even the very poor—an effort limited only by the state of national improvement—Edgeworth, in line with the social realities confronting many of Smith’s inheritors, is less sanguine. In *Ennui*, wanting, including the desire to better oneself (as represented by Ellinor’s improved housing), is presented as something that must be taught, perhaps enforced—and not only in semi-feudal Ireland, but *even* in commercial societies (Glenthorn’s ennui is, after all, a result of his *London* life). Consequently, the underdevelopment of exchange amongst the Irish is not a problem of their humanity or civility, as English prejudice held, but of their education. This is why McLeod, the Scots estate agent, asserts that the Irish need to be taught “to see clearly, and to follow steadily, their real interests” (193). (For Smith, in contrast, education was needed to mitigate, not promote, commercial society.) Edgeworth, it is true, by making Glenthorn the protagonist of her novel, displaces this problem from the laboring classes, who were the ones actually disciplined by magistrates for showing insufficient interest in bettering themselves, to the elite. The larger, un-Smithian point is preserved, however: the very impulse to exchange needs to be deliberately cultivated. Paradoxically, it is in underdeveloped Ireland that Glenthorn develops *his* want—and his humanity—within an overtly Smithian frame as a landlordly desire for material improvement.

Edgeworth’s notions of society and exchange are further elaborated in her next Irish fiction, *The Absentee*. This novel, which portrays the fate of an Irish estate in the years immediately following Union with Britain, adapts the *social* ideas of Smithian political economy directly to the dilem-

37. This house, built by Glenthorn in the “elegant style of English cottages” (189), is both luxurious and foreign compared to an Irish cabin; but its neglect marks a conflict of social stages, not of class or nationality.

38. Julie Costello, “Maria Edgeworth and the Politics of Consumption: Eating, Breast-feeding, and the Irish Wet Nurse in *Ennui*,” in Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash, eds., *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865* (UP of Kentucky, 1999) 175.

mas of national identity. For Smith the stages of society do not depend upon national manners (dependence flows the other way, from the means of subsistence to its cultural and social effects); indeed, it hardly makes sense to speak, with regard to Smith's views of primordial economic phenomena, of nations; even forms of government are secondary to the social stages consequent on forms of economy. From this perspective societies are ultimately a product of dynamic relations between social types produced within what Marx will dub the mode of production. Edgeworth takes Smith's notion of the socially determining role of the mode of production very seriously; *but* she breaks from him (and Marx) by proposing that these determinations may play out differently in different national contexts. Indeed, they *must* play out differently, since although Edgeworth accepts, with Smith, that the propensity to exchange is a fact of human nature, its development (she posits) is not. In this way Edgeworth qualifies the idea that differences in national manners are fundamentally due to differences in modes of production and guaranteed to decline under the cosmopolitical influence of a world system of commerce.

In applying Smithian political economy to national identity in *The Absentee*, Edgeworth is less interested in its orthodox application than in using it to break with existing political explanations of social development. Rather than explaining development on the basis of the Jacobin idea of the education and political circumstances of individuals, as William Godwin does, or the anti-Jacobin idea of customary local relations, as Burke does, Edgeworth bases it on the management of society-wide economic processes. Management—here involving a version of the Smithian legislator, but brought down from the level of the national polity to that of the Burkean platoon—is the feedback loop through which estate agents and other human actors such as landlords can attempt to channel economic forces and their social impacts. Thus where Smith moralizes exchange, and Burke moralizes subordination, Edgeworth moralizes management. For Smith, improvement was an *unintended* consequence of the increasing penetration of exchange practices in a society, and of the markets and division of labor consequent on exchange. Edgeworth adapts the political valence of Smith's work—including its critique of idle and despotic landlords—to open up the possibility of an *intended* amelioration, via a local enlightened landowner class, of colonial and religious abuses. The non-absenteeism Edgeworth advocates thus marries certain specific features of Burke and Smith—of paternalistic traditionalism and enlightened cosmopolitics—but always on the basis of a Smithian analysis of the material grounds of societies.

Edgeworth's promotion of forward-looking economic management is especially clear with the good estate agent in *The Absentee*, one Mr. Burke,

who is responsible, along with his wife, for a number of rather un- or semi-Burkean social good deeds (ironically, given his name). He resists many of the directives of the absentee Lord Clonbrony, for example, and sets up non-denominational schools in the face of local scepticism. These deeds are not guided by charitable or Christian or even customary paternalistic imperatives, however, but by a managerial theory of the material economic benefits they will create, in accord with Smithian doctrine, for the tenantry and local community. The realization of these benefits gives agent Burke legitimacy in the eyes of the local—that is, Catholic and Gaelic—community. His behavior contrasts sharply with that of the self-serving and arbitrary Nicholas Garraghty, agent for Lord Clonbrony's main estate, whose mismanagement is uniformly viewed as the work of an illegitimate grinding tyrant. Through the contrast of Burke and Garraghty, Edgeworth frames estate agency in terms of two kinds of governor-manager: a fellow participant in the local economy versus a foreign, expropriative ruler (Garraghty's actions, significantly, are a local instance of the abuses Smith associated with the system of colonial trade in general). The national implication of agent Burke's actions (besides the justification of Ascendency) is that stereotypes of the Irish such as their servility, sectarianism, and excessive hospitality, even when thought to be anchored in racial or cultural truth, are in fact open to mitigation via material development. In this context, Edgeworth's point is a Smithian one: national character, far from being an innate attribute of a people, a culture, or a tradition, depends on economic development; it is material, not cultural, at root.

Yet because Irish commerce is artificially constrained by colonial underdevelopment, material improvement entails different things for the Irish and the English. In Ireland, a political mechanism is needed to kick-start habits of strict justice and exchange suppressed by Anglo-Irish exploitation. Seamus Deane overlooks, I think, this dimension of Edgeworth's writing; to him, "her fiction is not an analysis but a symptom of the colonial problem" of Ireland (*Strange Country* 32–33); indeed, according to Deane,

Edgeworth believed that Ireland was backward, unenlightened, poor, ill led, even romantic, not because it was a colonial culture, but because it was Ireland. (32)

But Edgeworth, like Smith, *does* diagnose the problem of Ireland as one of colonial exploitation (an exploitation supported, perversely, by residual Irish customs). What she does not do is present a nationalist solution to this exploitation—hardly surprising, given her Smithianism. The letter of Larry Brady that concludes *The Absentee* shows how Edgeworth links her economic doctrine to local realities. This letter records the return of the Clonbrony family to their Irish estates and their renewed legitimacy in the

eyes of the local inhabitants, of course, but it also records several key socio-economic consequences of their residency, including (1) an economically-based alliance of Catholic and Protestant, (2) the alleviation of social dependency, and (3) a top-down social exemplarity modelling the real interests of the population. Most importantly, the letter shows how Brady is drawn towards his own real interests (according to the Smithian assumptions of the novel) by virtue of the socially-sanctioned, economically-rational behavior set before him by Lord Colambre.

In other words, Edgeworth portrays the successful diffusion of the Smithian agenda in Ireland as occurring through a Burkean mechanism of affective example, albeit one tied no longer to aristocratic birth or to national tradition but to economic improvement.<sup>39</sup> Along with her advocacy of a theoretically-driven, “Scots” economic management, this is her key contribution to thinking about the well-being of the Irish nation. The national characteristics of the Irish—such as their warmth, hospitality, and vivacity—energize this new-model, or Smithianized, Burkeanism. This is not the “improved paternalism” (Trumpener 49) often ascribed to Edgeworth, since the role of the little platoon here is to institute a mode of rational economic behavior, not a set of social duties. We are brought back, rather, to the question of wanting a want. What the form of Burkean sociality serves to communicate is an entirely un-Burkean social aspiration: the Smithian desire to better oneself. Still, there is something un-Smithian at work here, too, since the commercialization of Ireland, at least in the short term, requires the preservation—rather than destruction—of certain Irish values (such as warmth) and classes (such as the Anglo-Irish).

Edgeworth attempts to finesse the ideological paradoxes of her social vision by introducing a third national type (along with Irish and English) to *The Absentee*: the grasping and vengeful Jew of anti-Semitic prejudice. The Jewish coach-maker Mordicai is meant, I think, to distract readers from the hyperbolic materialism of *commercial* society by stigmatizing such excess as the vice of an interloping foreign *nation*.<sup>40</sup> But the ideological maneuvering around Mordicai is ultimately secondary to the materialism of Edgeworth’s vision of the fundamental wrongs of colonialism. Absenteeism restricts the consumption of the Anglo-Irish rich largely to an English market, thereby (according to Smith) holding back the rise of an Irish market in luxury goods. The wealth extracted from Ireland by non-resident landowners goes

39. For a different treatment of these issues, one which again links Edgeworth more closely to Burkean ideas of the gentry, see Teresa Michals, “Commerce and Character in Maria Edgeworth,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49 (1994): 6–8.

40. This anti-Semitic gesture was common enough in conservative accounts of commerce—Burke writes of “Jew brokers” and of “artificers and clowns, and money-jobbers, usurers, and Jews” (*Reflections* 48, 49)—but it is a gesture Smith, significantly, avoids.



either to feudal hospitality in Ireland (as when Garraghty must be paid off) or to luxury purchases outside Ireland (such as Lady Clonbrony's London gala), with the result that the Irish population as a whole is exploited and kept from properly valuing exchange. If the *past* sin of the Anglo-Irish was conquest, their *present* sin is absenteeism. Residency, according to Edgeworth, does more than legitimate Anglo-Irish rule; in line with Smith's recommendations in *The Wealth of Nations*, it counters the economic and political system of colonial mercantilism.

Edgeworth's most provocative account of the variability of the desire for fungible gain in different social contexts is with the figure of King Corny in *Ormond*, the last of her Irish fictions. Considered a "savage" by some, Corny is the king of the remote Black Islands, where he lives a life largely outside of exchange relations:

King Corny, who had the command not only of boats, and of guns, and of fishing-tackle, and of men, but of carpenters' tools, and of smiths' tools, and of a lathe, and of brass and ivory, and of all the things that the heart of a boy could desire, had appeared to Harry [Ormond], when he was a boy, the richest, the greatest, the happiest of men. The cleverest too—the most ingenious; for King Corny had with his own hands made a violin and a rat-trap; and had made the best coat, and the best pair of shoes, and the best pair of boots, and the best hat; and had knit the best pair of stockings, and had made the best dunghill in his dominions; and had made a quarter of a yard of fine lace, and had painted a panorama.<sup>41</sup>

Affectionate, proud, passionate, Corny cared "for no earthly consideration, and for no human opinion but his own" (53). Jack-of-all-trades and governor of his own little community, Corny represents a merged figure of laboring and governing feudal independence. Smith himself contrasts the independence and intelligence of the integrated labor of a ploughman with the delimiting and brutalizing nature of occupations in a period of an advanced division of labor. Smith also contrasts the independence of the allodial lord outside the circuits of commerce with the frivolous feudal consumer. But if Corny is independent, he is also circumscribed by his way of life, at least in the eyes of the novel's hero:

[As an adult, Harry] began to doubt whether it were worthy of a king, or a gentleman, to be his own shoemaker, hatter, and tailor; whether it were not better managed in society, where these things are performed by different tradesmen . . . having now seen and compared Corny's

41. Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990) 58, 51. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

violin with other violins, and having discovered that so much better could be had for money, with so much less trouble, his admiration had a little decreased. (51–52)

Corny's independence makes him dogmatic and even despotic. He is portrayed more like the irrational feudal figures described by Smith than the romantic figures of nationalist fiction, such as Owenson's Prince of Inismore. For his part, Ormond is grateful for Corny's lordly gift of a farm, but dismayed when Corny capriciously insists on keeping an old promise to marry his daughter to the son of a family friend, despite her wishes or her interest. In the end, Corny pays the ultimate price for his independence: in a cosmopolitical fable of the dangers of local production, one of his homemade guns explodes and kills him.

What ultimately dooms the system of feudal independence, represented in *Ormond* by Corny's Black Islands, is neither its despotic treatment of the rising generation nor its marginalization under English rule, but its impact on the poor. The operative assumption once again is that English rule in Ireland can be legitimated by way of commercial relations because the Irish poor, regardless of religion or ideology, will recognize and embrace their material self-interest. This is what Edgeworth portrays on the estate of the improving Sir Herbert Annaly: unlike Corny or the courtier-like Ulick (two sides of the same coin of economic despotism *à la* Smith, one Gaelic and custom-oriented, the other anglicizing and court-oriented), Sir Herbert

produced a considerable change for the better in the morals and habits of the people. . . . He treated them neither as slaves, subject to his will [as Corny effectively does]; nor as dupes, or objects on which to exercise his wit or his cunning [like Ulick]. He treated them as reasonable beings, and as his fellow-creatures, whom he wished to improve, that he might make them and himself happy. (235)

Sir Herbert replaces two systems of favor, one Milesian and traditional, the other Anglo-Irish and contemporary, with the free exchange of labor. The aim is to liberate the poor from what Smith terms the "servile dependency" (260) of paternalistic relationships, whether ancient or modern. Sir Herbert certainly operates on the basis of an explicit commitment to Smithian theory—claiming, for example, to value "justice more than generosity" (236). Indeed, the sociable and skill-producing enterprises that he sponsors—the construction of a lighthouse and the establishment of "a manufacture of sailcloth" (235)—differ not just from the favor-based activities of Corny and Ulick, but even from the economically valuable, if selfishly pursued, activity of the grazier White Connal. Connal is "not only

industrious, but rapacious" (99), "a hard man" (98) who on one occasion is actually seen "higgling with the poor child . . . sent to sell him [some] eggs" (96). Unlike the Mordicaian Connal, Sir Herbert helps to build the Irish economy, and it is his concern with the "improvement" of "the people" as well as of "the land" (232) that gives his enterprises their moral purpose.

It may seem ironic, then, that the participants in Sir Herbert's enterprises, while independent of favor, are locked into other circuits of dependency. Lighthouses and sailcloth are part of the infrastructure of a commercial shipping industry, an off-island, transnational enterprise under British control. Yet far from being problematic, international trade is presented as a spur for Irish development, since, along with local consumption by landlords, it is a key Smithian route to improvement. Thus the narrator of *Ormond* writes that "having turned grazier, was . . . the only point in Connal's character and conduct, for which he deserved esteem. . ." (99). The cattle produced by Irish graziers were usually sold on the English market, and it is significant that this enterprise, singled out for praise by the narrator, is "his chief fault" (99) in the eyes of the backward King Corny.<sup>42</sup> Having diagnosed the problem of present-day Irish colonialism as the underdevelopment of exchange, Edgeworth prescribes for its cure the growth of the Irish market. In this way the material well-being of the Irish poor is tied to the interests of the British navy and to the incorporation of Ireland into English markets—and thus to a *new* form of English hegemony.

Given the cosmopolitical consequences of Sir Herbert's enterprises, it remains an open question, in the end, whether Edgeworth most recommends commercial improvement because of the prosperity and human self-actualization she thinks it will offer Ireland, including its poor, or because of the legitimation she thinks it will offer a revised English rule. Surely it is significant that the fortune she delivers to her hero at the conclusion of the novel is an imperial one: with the death of his "mahogany-coloured stepmother and . . . Indian brother" (182), Ormond inherits the immense colonial treasure—£80,000—of his dead father. Apparently the Irish are entitled to their own portion of colonial loot. Those who interfere with relations of imperial trade, such as the smugglers who enjoy the "*favour and purtection [sic]*" (233) of the corrupt Sir Ulick, are predictably labelled "savages" (327). Thomas Davis, writing in 1843, called Edgeworth's recommendation of estate residency a sort of "pious Feudalism," and one certainly sees what he is driving at; nevertheless, for all the Burkean elements in Edgeworth, the economic implications of Smithian doctrine run deeper,

42. On Connal's trade as a grazier, see Clare Connolly, "Introduction," in Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, ed. Connolly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000) xxiv.

as I hope I have shown, and it might thus be fairer to describe her recommendation of estate residency as a form of *pious commercialism*.<sup>43</sup> In any event, exchangeable value, and the whole system of social explanation erected upon it, allows Edgeworth to stigmatize *both* backward-looking nationalists *and* expropriative landlords as co-dependent enemies of Irish development. The way forward for Ireland is to abandon reveries of either conquest or re-conquest in favor of a real, material happiness. For Edgeworth no less than Smith, this is the true value of national or international rule, in Ireland or anywhere else.

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43. Cited in Deane, *Strange Country* 73. A pious (that is, managerial) commercialism, but not, significantly, “the ‘embourgeoisement’ of the hero” suggested in Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 258.