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The Right to Life, the Right to Nature, and the Impact of Irish Land on Political Thought in the 1880s

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Abstract

The Irish Land War was a pivotal conflict in the history of liberal political thought. With significant impacts on both sides of the Atlantic, events in Ireland were about more than Irish self-determination. Heavily reliant on a discourse of natural right, and asserting a relationship between land ownership and democratic-republican citizenship, the Land War provided a vehicle for popular radical opposition to an increasingly positivist liberalism. This article examines the rationales and political assumptions underlying the demand for land, and how such arguments catalysed an intellectual response among liberal political thinkers. Particular moral and metaphysical ideas about the distinctiveness of land allowed agrarian and labour radicals to reassert individualized but non-possessive rights to natural resources. Rooted in a materialist politics of the human body, this purposive conception of land posed a significant threat to claims for private property, social order, and the ameliorative authority of the state, pressing both liberal and conservative thinkers away from unstable notions of individual rights. The crisis over Irish land helped to shift the terrain of political argument away from questions of participation and popular power, and toward amelioration and public welfare.

At the height of the Irish Land War in the autumn of 1881, the American social reformer and amateur political economist Henry George sailed for Ireland as an international correspondent for Irish-America's leading newspaper, the *Irish World*. His book, *Progress and poverty*, was gradually gaining attention, and would soon propel him to international fame as the prophetic voice of a new social and economic revolution based upon the collective ownership of land. In Ireland's revolt against landlordism, George not only saw fertile ground for his ideas but, like other radicals in Britain and the United States, also believed that he was witnessing an epochal conflict which was 'greater

than either the French or American Revolutions'.¹ Striking at the heart of British and Irish aristocracy, and with reverberations across the Atlantic and in Europe, the conflict over Irish land soon assumed a portentous significance. In many radical imaginations, the escalating Irish fight against land monopoly appeared as the keystone completing the emancipatory revolutions of the late eighteenth century; it would be, according to the esteemed former abolitionist Wendell Phillips, one of the 'last battles between democracy and aristocracy'.²

In framing the conflict in such grandiose terms, labour radicals and republicans clearly had high hopes for a transformational moment of world-historical proportions. Yet the Irish Land War itself, beginning in the west of the country with tenants' rights organizations before quickly becoming tethered to a broader nationalist movement for self-government, lasted for less than three years. It has been generally interpreted as, in essence, a petty-bourgeois land-grab whereby 'one class of Irish capitalists waged economic war against another class of Irish capitalists'; important for stimulating the national movement by motivating the self-interest of tenant farmers, but otherwise beset by class tensions, as well as regional and occupational divergence between its supporters.³ When the historiographical emphasis is restricted to its domestic impact, such an analysis can be compelling. Nevertheless, given the international importance accorded to the Irish Land War by contemporaries, how is it possible to reconcile these narrow interpretations with the broader ideological resonances perceived by so many at the time?

For a brief but critical moment, Irish land became central to an ideological transfiguration of liberalism across the Gilded Age Atlantic world. Relying heavily on conceptions of natural right, and reasserting an intimate relationship between land ownership and democratic-republican citizenship, the Land War emerged at a decisive juncture in Anglo-American political thought. The questions raised by Irish land were not only pertinent to the future of Irish self-government, as historians of Ireland have long made clear, but became, on both sides of the Atlantic, a proxy war against an increasingly positivist political liberalism.⁴ The political rhetoric that energized the Irish Land War drew

¹ Henry George, *The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, 9 July 1881.

² Wendell Phillips, 'The money power or the masses', *Irish World*, 9 Nov. 1878.

³ R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in context: Irish politics & society, 1848-1882* (Dublin, 1985), p. 234; see also Samuel Clark, *The social origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton, NJ, 1979); Paul Bew, *Land and the national question in Ireland, 1858-1882* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1979); Donald E. Jordan Jr, *Land and popular politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the Plantation to the Land War* (Cambridge, 1994); Philip Bull, *Land, politics and nationalism: a study of the Irish land question* (Dublin, 1996).

⁴ Matthew Kelly, *The Fenian ideal and Irish nationalism, 1882-1916* (Woodbridge, 2006); Paul Bew, 'The Land League ideal: achievements and contradictions', in P. J. Drudy, ed., *Ireland: land, politics and people* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 77-92. On the tensions within late nineteenth-century liberal thought, see Michael Taylor, *Herbert Spencer and the limits of the state: the late nineteenth-century debate between individualism and collectivism* (Bristol, 1996); Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and political argument in England, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1979); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic crossings: social politics in a progressive age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Dorothy Ross, 'Socialism and American liberalism: academic social thought in the 1880s', *Perspectives in American History*, 11 (1978), pp. 7-79; Sandra den Otter, *British idealism and social explanation: a study in late*

on long-standing moral and metaphysical assumptions about land and its purposive role in relation to human survival. This articulation entailed a particular ontology of value that appealed deeply to many: not only Irish farmers but radicals in Britain and America for whom land represented the foundation of a much more just and comprehensible political economy.⁵ The widespread agrarian agitation, internationalized partly through the influence of Henry George's campaigns, promoted a notion of individual but non-possessive rights to nature, which were limited within the bounds of a natural law common good yet based upon the individual's *a priori* 'right to life': an articulation of natural rights framed within a wider cosmology of a harmonious moral universe. Threatened by what they perceived as the centralizing technocratic tendencies of an emergent social liberalism alongside, for many radicals in Ireland, Britain, and the US, the Land War was significant precisely because it suggested the possibility of finally realizing the fragile republican trinity of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity'.⁶

As both the fundamental site of economic and political power, as well as an essential prerequisite of human life and habitation, land has always been a particularly volatile element in theories of political governance.⁷ Just as Aquinas had declared that the earth was initially divinely bestowed to all humans in common, most subsequent theories of possession followed this lead by requiring some type of conjecture with which to legitimize its individuation.⁸ Yet, at the same time, Aquinas had concluded that since 'the division and appropriation of property' proceeded from human rather than natural law, it 'must not hinder the satisfaction of man's necessity from such goods'.⁹ In other words, private ownership of land was not itself natural nor divinely prescribed, and should not restrict the natural right to life and self-preservation. These ambiguities in the origins of private property in land, tethered as they were to an *a priori* right to life, were reinscribed by later scholastic thinkers in opposition to absolutist theories of the state.¹⁰ Property in land being the

Victorian thought (Oxford, 1996); Robert Adcock, *Liberalism and the emergence of American political science: a transatlantic tale* (Oxford, 2014).

⁵ Peter d'A. Jones, 'Henry George and British socialism', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 47 (1988), pp. 486–7.

⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 16 Jan. 1883.

⁷ Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and freedom: an environmental history of political ideas* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 49.

⁸ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade: international competition and the nation-state in historical perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), p. 421; Jacob Viner, *Religious thought and economic society: four chapters of an unfinished work* (Durham, NC, 1978), p. 67.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, Question 66, Article 7; see also Peter Singer, 'Famine, affluence and morality', in P. Laslett and J. Fishkin, eds., *Philosophy, politics and society* (Oxford, 1979), p. 31.

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought, II: The age of reformation* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 138–53; Alfred O'Rahilly, 'The Catholic origin of democracy', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 8 (1919), pp. 1–18; Alfred O'Rahilly, 'St Thomas's theory of property', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 9 (1920), p. 341.

basis of power, denaturalizing the right to the former inevitably destabilized the latter, and such conceptions bolstered theories of resistance to political power by rooting natural rights to self-preservation in the individual, providing a rebuttal to the divine authority claimed by monarchical absolutists.¹¹

This ungainly basis of land rights, in which self-preservation and the natural right to life tended to both justify access to land while simultaneously undermining possessive authority over it, meant that the question of land had long tended to press political theorists away from naturalized notions of right, and toward utilitarian and positivist justifications of individuated private property. The influential eighteenth-century English jurist William Blackstone, for instance, observed that while ‘accurately and strictly speaking, there is no foundation in nature or in natural law, why a set of words upon parchment should convey the dominion of land’, such questions would be ‘troublesome in common life. It is well if the mass of mankind will obey the laws when made, without scrutinizing too nicely into the reasons of making them.’¹² Blackstone was right to be cautious.

The idea that an inalienable right to life brought with it a commensurate right to land, drawing deeply egalitarian conclusions from a fundamentally individualist principle, echoed through the work of subsequent radicals and republicans. Both Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence defended the right to land on the basis of its divine origination as the common inheritance of humanity, since, as the latter explained: ‘there is no living but on land and its productions, consequently, what we cannot live without we have the same property in as our lives’.¹³ The individualist proposition of self-preservation – ‘that fundamental maxim, upon which alone all property can be supported’ as John Thelwall put it – appeared to be an assurance that the right to property could not overwhelm human need.¹⁴ Ireland, in particular, had long served as an example of the most egregious violations of this principle. It was the English radical Thomas Hodgskin who complained in the early nineteenth century that Ireland was suffering from a precise inversion of the ‘right to land’. Here, he complained, ‘the precept of self-preservation’ (what he described in fundamentally materialist terms as ‘the dictate of the holy and delightful impulse by which we cherish our happy animal existence’) was being entirely recast. Where such arguments had been used to support access to land, they were now ‘transferred to the institutions of barbarous men’ in order to secure for legislators ‘the produce of those who cultivate

¹¹ Richard Tuck, *Natural rights theories: their origin and development* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 144–5.

¹² William Blackstone, *The commentaries on the laws of England*, II: *Of the rights of things* (1765), ed. Robert Malcolm Kerr (London, 1876), pp. 1–2; see also Michael Lobban, ‘Blackstone and the science of law’, *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), p. 312.

¹³ Thomas Spence, in Henry M. Hyndman, ed., *The nationalization of the land in 1775 and 1882* (London, 1882), p. 10; Thomas Paine, ‘Agrarian justice’ (1797), in Max Beer, ed., *The pioneers of land reform: Thomas Spence, William Ogilvie, Thomas Paine* (London, 1920), p. 180; Robert Lamb, ‘Liberty, equality, and the boundaries of ownership: Thomas Paine’s theory of property rights’, *The Review of Politics*, 72 (2010), p. 510.

¹⁴ John Thelwall, *The rights of nature, against the usurpations of establishments* (London, 1796), p. 18.

the soil'.¹⁵ Shorn of its original purpose, the right to land simply became a defence of possession that 'violat[ed] the principle [self-preservation] from which the analogy is derived'.¹⁶

This close connection between questions of property in land and natural law arguments regarding the moral purposiveness of human bodies in the natural world remained pertinent through the nineteenth century. John Stuart Mill, for instance, relied upon the purposiveness of land in relation to human survival to explain its unique character as a form of property. 'Now, when we know the reason of a thing, we know what ought to be its limits', he explained of property in land. 'The limits of the reason ought to be the limits of the thing. The thing itself should stop where the reason stops.'¹⁷ Since, Mill reasoned, 'the land is not of man's creation' and was instead 'the original inheritance of the whole species', any exclusion from a 'gift of nature' which had 'belonged as much to all others' was a basic and inescapable injustice in need of remedy.¹⁸ Understood in this way, possession could not be fully alienated or contracted away, for even if some imagined initial distribution of land had been equitable, there was, Mill argued, 'an apparent wrong to posterity, to at least all those subsequently born who do not inherit a share'.¹⁹

The distinctiveness of land as a form of property, both in its elemental necessity for human life and in its unhuman creation, drew in its wake some challenging political implications that were deeply unappealing to both free-trade and idealist liberalism in the decades after Mill's death in 1873. The liberal politician and academic Henry Fawcett spoke for many when he lauded Mill's good intentions while lamenting the complexity and utopianism of his solutions to the land question, which could 'neither be defended on grounds of justice nor expediency'.²⁰ Others went further. Joseph Shield Nicholson, Professor of Political Economy at Edinburgh, blamed Mill's commitment to the distinctiveness of land for 'the present clamour for the land for the people and the appropriation of the unearned increment'.²¹ Mill's insistence on 'reasserting the distinction [between real and moveable property] in its most naked form' implied a right to land that existed beyond the authority of the state, rendering his underlying political assumptions irretrievably individualist, while at the same time also threatening 'the great

¹⁵ Thomas Hodgskin, *The natural and artificial right of property contrasted* (London, 1832), p. 46; popular agrarianism in the early nineteenth century echoed this resistance to the implementation of a rationalized, utilitarian social order. See Alun Howkins and Ian Dyke, "'The time's alteration": popular ballads, rural radicalism and William Cobbett', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), pp. 20–38.

¹⁶ Hodgskin, *The natural and artificial right*, p. 46.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Tract on the right of property in land* (1873), in Hugh S. R. Elliot, ed., *The letters of John Stuart Mill*, II (London, 1910), p. 388.

¹⁸ John Stuart Mill, quoted in James J. Clancy, *The Land League manual* (New York, NY, 1881), p. 16; Mill, *Tract on the right of property in land*, p. 387; see too John Stuart Mill, 'Advice to land reformers', *The Examiner*, 4 Jan. 1873.

¹⁹ Mill, *Tract on the right of property in land*, p. 388.

²⁰ Henry Fawcett, *State socialism and the nationalisation of the land* (London, 1883), p. 10.

²¹ Joseph Shield Nicholson, 'A plea for orthodox political economy', *National Review*, 6 (1885), p. 557.

principle of Free Exchange'.²² Mill's approach to the land question appeared to mould an individualist metaphysic into a collectivist politics, with the finitude of land acting to restrain possessiveness with purposiveness; assumptions of its moral and political distinctiveness tethering natural rights claims to demands for collective welfare.

It was this political cosmology that Henry George so successfully and popularly articulated in the 1880s, and which also underpinned the political discourse of the Irish Land War. The American political economist achieved astounding global influence after the publication of his first book, *Progress and poverty*, in 1879. In the lengthy and methodically detailed work, George attacked social injustice, physical deprivation, and mental degradation, and argued that because of the centrality of land to all economic activity, the failure of economic gains to accrue to labour was due to the private ownership of naturally productive resources. His solution, the full taxation of ground rents, aimed to nationalize the value of land while keeping private possession intact, and would, according to George, restore a natural harmony and justice to society.²³

His book was to become the best-selling work of political economy in the nineteenth century, and, according to one estimate, 'second only to the Bible in nineteenth-century readership'.²⁴ While George's publisher had every reason to make the grandiose claim that 'never before, probably has a single book so influenced the public mind in so short a time', it was an opinion later endorsed by J. A. Hobson, who noted that George had 'exercised a more directly powerful formative and educative influence over English radicalism' during the late nineteenth century 'than any other man'.²⁵ For Sidney Webb, writing in the 1890s, the catalyst for what he described as 'the new current of thought' had primarily been, a decade earlier, 'the wide circulation in Great Britain of Mr. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*'.²⁶ His immense influence was evidence that his ideas tapped into a deep well of popular sentiment on the land question. George's autodidactic republicanism, his claim that his single-tax plans would 'approach the ideal of Jeffersonian democracy' by reducing the power of both capital and the state was applauded in auditoriums in New York, Dublin, Birmingham, Montreal, Inverness, and far beyond.²⁷

²² Louis Mallet to J. E. Thorold Rogers, 5 Nov. 1873, cited in Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford, 1998), p. 125.

²³ Henry George, *Progress and poverty: an inquiry into the cause of industrial depressions, and of increase of want with increase of wealth. The remedy* (New York, NY, 1879).

²⁴ Jeffrey Sklansky, *The soul's economy: market society and selfhood in American thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), p. 115.

²⁵ J. C. Durant to Henry George, London, n.d., New York, New York Public Library (NYPL), Henry George papers, series I: A, box 3; J. A. Hobson, 'The influence of Henry George in England', *The Fortnightly Review*, n.s. 62 (1897), p. 844.

²⁶ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The history of trade unionism* (1894) (2nd edn, London, 1896), p. 361; Sidney Webb, *Socialism in England* (London, 1890), pp. 21-3; Thomas Kirkup, *A history of socialism* (1892) (4th edn, London, 1909), p. 328.

²⁷ David Montgomery, *Citizen worker: the experience of workers in the United States with democracy and the free market during the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 112.

Central to the popularity of George's economic plan was its underpinning moral vision. His commitment to a universal and inalienable right to land was derived from the perception that the natural world was divinely created in order to ensure humans' natural right to life and self-preservation. While all 'material creation is [humanity's] inheritance', George argued, it was humans' 'physical construction' that provided their 'title deed'.²⁸ In this way, the right to land was an inescapable deduction from humans' bodily constitution. George's egalitarian republican politics emerged from his belief in the underlying sameness of the human animal, and its physical dependence on nature, in all corners of the globe. Not only did George rely heavily on conceptions of the physical body to justify his politics, but he devoted a considerable portion of *Progress and poverty* to demonstrating 'the essential similarity of men' in order to refute racialized and Darwinian defences of human inequalities.²⁹

Responding to a critique offered by the duke of Argyll in *The Nineteenth Century*, George again returned to the human body as a defence of universal equality, rhetorically asking the aristocrat to identify the difference between the baby of a landowner and that of a workhouse inmate.³⁰ The universal physical and mental attributes of the human body were evidence of the 'intent in Nature' by which land should provide for the flourishing of all humanity rather than the luxury of a privileged few.³¹ In his work on theistic evolutionism, *The reign of law*, the duke had similarly identified such divine intent in nature, marvelling at adaptations in animal species as evidence for the role of physical necessity in stimulating invention and exertion.³² 'Will he let me ask him to look in the same way at the human beings around him?' George asked with reference to the duke's evolutionary studies. Describing monstrous scenes of human immiseration, the American inquired,

if the hook of the bat be intended to climb by and the wing of the bird be intended to fly by, with what intent have human creatures been given capabilities of body and mind which under conditions that exist in such countries as Great Britain only a few of them can use and enjoy?³³

The only explanation, as far as George was concerned, was that individual and collective flourishing was stymied by a refusal to observe the purposive relationship between humans and land. 'The moment we consider in the largest way what kind of animal man is', he explained, 'we see in the most important of social adjustments [private property in land] a violation of Nature's intent sufficient to account for want and misery and aborted development'.³⁴

²⁸ George, *Irish World*, 10 Jan. 1880.

²⁹ George, *Progress and poverty*, p. 447.

³⁰ Henry George, 'The "reduction to iniquity"', in *Property in land: a passage-at-arms between the duke of Argyll and Henry George* (New York, NY, 1884), p. 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

³² George Campbell, *The reign of law* (London, 1867), pp. 128, 433.

³³ George, 'The "reduction to iniquity"', pp. 53–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

II

An agrarian hinterland embedded within the political economy of the North Atlantic, Ireland was unsurprisingly central to this transnational discourse of land and natural rights. Outside of Belfast and Dublin, cultural and economic life remained inseparable from the land. In the aftermath of the Famine in the 1840s, rising agricultural prices had created some burgeoning prosperity, but it was focused primarily in the south and east of the country where grazing and an increasingly commercialized agricultural sector was developing.³⁵ While in the north the 'Ulster custom' of tenant right securities provided a degree of protection for tenants, as well as a model for attempts at legislative reform, severe poverty remained for many farmers, particularly in the west of Ireland, and for landless workers across the island.³⁶ Following the failure of Gladstone's 1870 Land Act to make any significant alterations to ownership structures, tenants' rights organizations began to gain influence in the poorer west of the country during the subsequent decade. These groups would go on to form the nucleus of the larger nationwide fight against landlordism, but it was the effects of a partial crop failure in 1879 that sparked the agitation itself.³⁷ Memories of the suffering and starvation a generation earlier suddenly became very vivid, especially as evictions for non-payment of rent increased dramatically in 1880.³⁸

The conflict grew to encompass many disparate elements of Irish rural society. The Land League, founded by Fenian radical Michael Davitt in late 1879, became something of an awkward alliance between small farmers and larger ones, between allied agricultural labourers and shopkeepers, many of whom were owed significant sums by local farmers, as well as between advanced and revolutionary nationalists, home rulers, land nationalizers, and labour radicals.³⁹ Partly due to this heterogeneity, the demands of the League were sometimes hard to pin down, oscillating between the narrow call for lower rents and more security of tenure, and the popular cry of 'Land for the People'.⁴⁰ What was clearer, however, was the lasting legacy of generations

³⁵ W. E. Vaughan, 'Ireland c. 1870', in W. E. Vaughan, ed., *A new history of Ireland, V: Ireland under the Union, 1801–1870* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 756–8; Donnacha Sean Lucey, *Land, popular politics and agrarian violence in Ireland: the case of County Kerry, 1872–1886* (Dublin, 2011), p. 8.

³⁶ James S. Donnelly Jr, *The land and people of nineteenth-century Cork: the rural economy and the land question* (London, 1975), p. 250; Samuel Clark, 'Strange bedfellows? The Land League alliances', in Fergus Campbell and Tony Varley, eds., *Land questions in modern Ireland* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 94–5.

³⁷ Brian Casey, 'Matt Harris and the Irish land question, 1876–1882', *Rural History*, 25 (2014), pp. 183–201; Gerard Moran, "'Laying the seeds for agrarian agitation": the Ballinasloe Tenants Defence Association, 1876–1880', in Carla King and Conor McNamara, eds., *The west of Ireland: new perspectives on the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2011).

³⁸ Daniel Crilly, *Irish evictions* (London, 1887), pp. 7–8; on recollections of the Famine, 1845–52, see Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, p. 204; Lucey, *Land, popular politics and agrarian violence*, p. 42.

³⁹ Samuel Clark, 'The social composition of the Land League', *Irish Historical Studies*, 17 (1971), pp. 447–69.

⁴⁰ Henry George, 'Lecture on the Irish land question, Dublin Rotunda', 10 June 1882, NYPL, Henry George papers, series II, box 13; Eric Foner, 'Class, ethnicity, and radicalism in the gilded age: the

of Irish agrarian radicalism on the movement. Polemicists from the United Irishman Thomas Russell, to the Young Irelander James Fintan Lalor, had articulated an agrarian epistemology that projected the harmony of the natural world onto social life – a focus on natural fertility and human labour as the foundations of social value – that was itself embodied in the discourses and practices of rural resistance employed by the League and its predecessors.⁴¹ As Lalor had explained in the 1840s, access to land was demanded by ‘the great necessity of self-defence’ and ‘self-protection’, which was ‘the first law of nature, the first duty of man’.⁴² For his part, George, with his talent for decorative exposition, claimed that his ideas were simply material ‘truths I have heard over and over again from the likes of old men who could not speak a word of English when I sat by the peat fires of Connaught cabins’.⁴³ This normative naturalism facilitated a seamless segue between the historical and the universal; it was the ‘nature taught peasants’ of Ireland, physically unalienated from the land, who had the clearest access to conceptions of property that had ‘been everywhere recognized by the first perceptions of men’.⁴⁴ Republican radicals like the erstwhile Chartist, National Reformer, and Fenian Thomas Ainge Devyr, who later wrote for the *Irish World* during the agitation, firmly tied this intellectual thread, in which only the needs and productive capabilities of the human body justified access to land, to the discourse of the Land War.⁴⁵

The momentum for the agitation was spread through the press and by large public meetings, where the land issue was framed as a question of the natural right to self-preservation. On public platforms, popular demands for peasant proprietorship were expressed with this corporeal republican language, and rights claims therefore directed away from acquisitiveness and toward the harmoniousness implied by such natural limitations. While the practical implications of a peasant proprietorship that resisted the logic of market consolidation and private accumulation was addressed in a more systematic fashion by Michael Davitt, he was only articulating schematically the implications of this popular discourse.⁴⁶ This is significant, since the rhetorical claim of ‘Land for the People’ has sometimes been dismissed as a collectivist veneer,

Land League and Irish America’, in *Politics and ideology in the age of the Civil War* (New York, NY, 1981), p. 160; Terrence McBride, ‘John Ferguson, Michael Davitt, and Henry George – land for the people’, *Irish Studies Review*, 14 (2006), pp. 421–30.

⁴¹ Thomas Russell, *A letter to the people of Ireland on the present situation of the country* (Belfast, 1796), p. 17.

⁴² James Fintan Lalor, in L. Fogarty, ed., *James Fintan Lalor: patriot and political essayist* (Dublin, 1918), pp. 66, 129, 85.

⁴³ Henry George, ‘Letter in defense of Michael Davitt and the Irish Land League’, NYPL, Henry George papers, series II, box 12.

⁴⁴ Thomas Ainge Devyr, *Our natural rights: a pamphlet for the people* (Belfast, 1835) (Williamsburg, NY, self-published, 1842), p. 11; George, *Irish World*, 1 May 1880.

⁴⁵ Devyr, *Our natural rights*, p. 25; Niall Whelehan, *Changing land: diaspora activism and the Irish Land War* (New York, NY, 2021).

⁴⁶ Michael Davitt, *Land nationalisation; or, national peasant proprietary: Michael Davitt’s lectures in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1884).

thinly covering an attempt to entrench exclusive private ownership.⁴⁷ Yet, as was often made clear, the ‘Land for the People’ was not simply a political but an ontological statement: an assertion that ‘the land was made for the people’.⁴⁸ Rev. Cornelius McCarthy, speaking in Newcastle, Co. Limerick, explained that ‘there is no person in the community at present, however humble his capacity, who does not clearly understand, thanks to the teaching of the League, that the Almighty God created the land for the use and benefit of the people’.⁴⁹

On Land League platforms across Ireland, upon which priests in particular tended to play a prominent role, the connection between the natural right of self-preservation, and the function of land as a unique form of property that could enable that self-preservation, was made explicit. ‘We hear a great deal about law from platforms of this kind’, proclaimed the influential Rev. Eugene Sheehy at Ballingarry. ‘The law of England in regard to Ireland is a burlesque upon the natural law. (A voice, “Surely.”) The first law of nature is self-preservation. (Hear, hear) The positive, the civil law of England has never recognised that divine principle. (A voice, “Never.”)’⁵⁰ A farmer from Athy in Kildare spoke to an assembled crowd in that town, and proclaimed similarly that the fight for land was rooted in ‘self-preservation[, something] to which every man is entitled’.⁵¹ ‘According to the laws of any age man was entitled to live’, and this, as one speaker at Ballinlough explained, was ‘the law of God,...higher than any law that can be promulgated by any assembly’.⁵² The natural right to life featured prominently in Land League discourse, and the notion of self-preservation was absolutely central to the League’s political demands. ‘The law of God says you must resist a robber at night, and I fail to see the difference between [the robber and the landlord].’⁵³

George’s support in Ireland was limited by various factors, not least his mutual distrust of the more conservative Parnellite wing of the Land League and ‘mere Irish Nationalists’ who failed to understand, as George saw it, the profound moral necessity and global implications of his ideas.⁵⁴ While he vocally condemned British misrule in Ireland, George’s scheme did little to address this reality, and, as one Irish supporter noted, while many were drawn to its ‘principles’, they ‘would be loath to give up their lands to any government which is not in their own hands’.⁵⁵ Despite these obstacles,

⁴⁷ Kerby Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: culture, class, and transatlantic migration* (Dublin, 2008), p. 267; Thomas N. Brown, *Irish American nationalism, 1870–1890* (Philadelphia, PA, 1966), pp. 46, 153–4; R. V. Comerford, ‘The politics of distress, 1877–1882’, in Vaughan, ed., *A new history of Ireland*, V, p. 47; Tom Garvin, ‘Republicanism and democracy in Ireland’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 102 (2013), pp. 181–9.

⁴⁸ *Connaught Telegraph*, 12 May 1877.

⁴⁹ Rev. Cornelius McCarthy, at Newcastle, Co. Limerick, 7 Nov. 1880, Dublin, National Library of Ireland (NLI), S. L. Anderson papers, MS 11,289.

⁵⁰ Rev. Sheehy, Ballingarry, 14 Nov. 1880, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Mr. Whelan, Athy, 10 Oct. 1880, *ibid.*

⁵² Joseph Walsh, Ballinlough, 27 June 1880, *ibid.*

⁵³ Patrick Brady, Ballinagleragh, 5 Sept. 1880, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Fr. Thomas Dawson to Henry George, 21 Sept. 1882, NYPL, Henry George papers, series I: A, box 3.

⁵⁵ Mary Hamilton to Henry George, 10 Mar. 1883, *ibid.*, box 4.

however, the influence of his ideas was pervasive and profound, not least through his close relationship with Michael Davitt and association with the *Irish World*. Grounding their claim to land in an *a priori* right to life, the analysis proffered by many Land League speakers resonated deeply with George's, sharing the anti-Malthusian conclusions that resulted from the distinctiveness of land as property in its purposive role to provide for humans' natural right to life. Although the Parnellite wing of the League was deeply suspicious of George, his 'works are far more widely read and studied than we in England or Ireland are willing to admit' noted one observer, and some in the British political establishment were inclined to view the entire conflict as part of an ideological war waged by 'hiberno-Americans' on property and civilization.⁵⁶

Land League oratory echoed George's ideas not only in rhetorical form, but in its underlying assumptions about the significance of land, as the country was engulfed by forms of public resistance and waves of mass meetings during 1880 and 1881. Rental increases were 'created and made not by the landlords, not by the gentry, but by the tenant occupiers of Ireland', and so landlords 'had no right whatever in equity or justice' to rental income.⁵⁷ Liberal interventionist policies such as legally determined rents and fixed term tenures were regularly derided as self-defeating amelioration: fixity of tenure was 'fixity of landlordism and fixity of degradation'.⁵⁸ Ultimately, explained one speaker, this was because 'no man made this land...God made the land, not for a few, He made it for the many.'⁵⁹ In tying together the uniqueness of land as finite property with the anti-Malthusian proposition of its divine purpose, Land League speakers grounded their natural rights claims to the land within a natural law framework of self-preservation.⁶⁰ It was this particular constellation of claims that formed the basis of the Land War's international appeal as a political counterweight to a developing social liberal consensus.

Consequently, the question of the distinctiveness of land as property was hotly contested, central as it was to whether an egalitarian formulation of natural rights could be preserved or not. It was regularly verbalized during Land League meetings, such as in Cavan, in October of 1880, when a parish priest answered an imagined landlord with the rebuke: 'you cannot dispose of your farm [as you wish], because your cart of hay was created by man, but the land was created by God'.⁶¹ This critical distinction between real and moveable property was also manifest in the tactical approach of the Land League, which oscillated between offering lower rents, rent at the point of the bayonet, or no rent at all. Land League leaders Charles Stuart Parnell and Michael Davitt demanded that debts to shopkeepers should be paid before anything owed

⁵⁶ 'Review of *Progress and poverty*', *Edinburgh Review*, 157, no. 321 (1883), p. 290; Standish O'Grady, *The crisis in Ireland* (Dublin, 1882), p. 20.

⁵⁷ Mr Jordan at Bawnboy, Cavan, 30 Oct. 1880, NLI, MS 11,289; Patrick Brady at Bawnboy, Cavan, 30 Oct. 1880, *ibid*.

⁵⁸ Patrick Brady at Bawnboy, Cavan, 30 Oct. 1880, *ibid*.

⁵⁹ J. B. McHugh, Bailiborough, 21 Oct. 1880, *ibid*.

⁶⁰ Mulhallett Marum, Athy, 10 Oct. 1880, *ibid*.

⁶¹ Rev. Boylan, Bailiborough, 21 Oct. 1880, *ibid*.

in rent – in rejection of the Irish law of distress, under which landlords were the principal creditors. The radical publisher John Ferguson, a prominent figure on mass meeting platforms, was clear that ‘the shopkeeper must be paid and there must be no attempt whatever to meddle with his right to be paid’.⁶² Rather than simply a consequence of the over-representation of shopkeepers in the Land League, these injunctions reinforced significant distinctions in types of property and conceptions of value.⁶³ It was, above all, a question of natural right. Since land provided for life, and ‘the first duty of an occupier of land is to support both himself and his family...no matter what a landlord may tell you that the law of England sometimes gives the power to the landlords to take away the first fruits, you are entitled to it’.⁶⁴ If, after having provided for education and the necessities of the home, Michael Davitt told a meeting in Milltown, Galway, in 1879, ‘there was sufficient left to pay the rent, I would pay it’.⁶⁵

Critical voices observed that rent refusal was a political choice rather than a matter of absolute destitution, a consequence of ‘communism alone’ according to the earl of Lucan, stemming from a belief in the distinctiveness of land.⁶⁶ While much of George’s intellectual energy in the 1880s was devoted to correcting opponents who insisted on ‘using the term “property” as coextensive with the term “property in land”’, so too were Land League supporters engaged in a similar effort to emphasize the difference.⁶⁷ While the *Boston Pilot*, under the editorship of former Fenian felon John Boyle O’Reilly, informed its readers that ‘the distinction between debt and rent in Ireland is so broad and clear that no one can possibly confuse the two except through sheer malice’, the conservative *Dublin Evening Mail* contended that there was no material distinction between rent and other debts.⁶⁸ Among the rights of property, it observed, ‘is that of lending the use of it to another person for a money consideration, called rent’.⁶⁹ It was a position firmly endorsed by the growing cadre of academic marginalists for whom the Ricardian typology of rent and debt was obsolete.⁷⁰ Consequently, the equivocations of classical economists, such as John Elliot Cairnes, who struggled to accommodate a conviction that land was distinct without relying on naturalized notions of right or value,

⁶² John Ferguson, *Freeman’s Journal*, 20 Oct. 1880.

⁶³ Clark, ‘Strange bedfellows?’, p. 99.

⁶⁴ James McMorro, Ballinagleragh, 5 Sept. 1880, NLI, MS 11,289.

⁶⁵ Michael Davitt, *Connaught Telegraph*, 21 June 1879.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, p. 323.

⁶⁷ Henry George to Archbishop Corrigan, 7 Dec. 1886, repr. in Kenneth C. Wenzler, ed., *Henry George, the transatlantic Irish, and their times* (Bingley, 2009), p. 232.

⁶⁸ *Boston Pilot*, 17 Jan. 1880.

⁶⁹ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 10 Jan. 1880.

⁷⁰ Alfred Marshall, ‘Three lectures on *Progress and poverty*’ (1883), repr. in *Journal of Law and Economics*, 12 (1969), p. 224; James J. Shaw, ‘The nationalization of the land’, *Journal of the Social and Statistical Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 8 (1884), pp. 492–508; Elwood P. Lawrence, ‘Henry George’s Oxford speech’, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 30 (1951), pp. 117–23.

came to be deemed 'intrinsically unsound' during the 1880s.⁷¹ George's popular impact, alongside the Land War, accelerated the abandonment of lingering Ricardian inheritances among economists, who saw that 'the folly of endeavouring to remedy poverty by advocating the confiscation of land' had been a latent consequence of the Ricardian failure 'to classify rent and interest together as two species of one genus'.⁷²

Among the most influential and comprehensive clerical interventions in the Land War was Bishop Thomas Nulty's pastoral letter on *The land question*. A critical reflection on Gladstone's anticipated land bill, the essay framed landlordism as a form of political slavery and achieved widespread popularity through its promotion by the *Irish World*, eliciting delight from George that 'the priests are distributing it', and that 'the tory papers and all the English papers are reprinting it as an outrageous official declaration of communism from a Catholic Bishop'.⁷³ Even Karl Marx was struck by the remarkable 'declaration against landownership (private) by an Irish bishop'.⁷⁴ Nulty's letter represented the most direct and visible attempt to connect distinctively Thomist and republican approaches to the Irish land question. Demanding that any political settlement was based on the unique 'eternal and immutable principles of justice which determine the character of property in land', the bishop argued that the natural right to life determined that the singular purpose of land was collective subsistence, a right to which could not be alienated, either individually or collectively.⁷⁵ As such, the bishop's corporeal republican politics ensured that 'no one can have an exceptional right to claim more than a fair share of what was intended equally for all; and what is, indeed, directly or indirectly, a necessary of life for each of them'.⁷⁶ For Nulty, this meant that land could only ever be held in usufruct, and that 'the people of that country, in their public corporate capacity *are*, and always *must be*, the real owners of the land of their country'.⁷⁷

The popular appeal of these ideas was remarkable, and was made possible not least by the wide reach of the *Irish World* and *American Industrial Liberator*. Its editor, the Galway-born Patrick Ford, had cut his journalistic teeth on the crusading abolitionist paper *The Liberator* under William Lloyd Garrison, and adopted, along with its masthead, a similarly forthright

⁷¹ John Kells Ingram, *A history of political economy* (1888) (London, 1919), p. 151; John Elliot Cairnes, *Essays in political economy: theoretical and applied* (London, 1873), pp. 191, 197–8, 210; Thomas Sowell, *Classical economics reconsidered* (Princeton, NJ, 1974), p. 14.

⁷² Edwin Cannan, *A history of the theories of production and distribution in English political economy from 1776 to 1848* (1893) (2nd edn, London, 1903), p. 393; John Maloney, *Marshall, orthodoxy and the professionalisation of economics* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 207.

⁷³ Henry George to Patrick Ford, Dublin, 28 Dec. 1881, NYPL, Henry George papers, series I: B; Thomas Nulty, *The land question: letter of the Most Rev. Dr. Nulty to the clergy and laity of the diocese of Meath* (Dublin, 1881), p. 4.

⁷⁴ Karl Marx to Jenny Longuet, 7 Dec. 1881, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Ireland and the Irish question* (Moscow, 1971), p. 331.

⁷⁵ Nulty, *The land question*, pp. 10, 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

approach to its political causes.⁷⁸ The paper's agrarian radicalism was articulated through demands to 'secure to each his natural rights', arguing that equal entitlement to 'the opportunities of Nature' was a 'self evident' and 'inalienable right', and had advocated, long before George's emergence, for a discreet limit to landholdings.⁷⁹ These ideals propelled the paper to great influence, achieving a circulation of between 60,000 and 125,000 during the 1880s that dwarfed other Irish newspapers and most labour papers too.⁸⁰ Its impact was felt strongly in Ireland. A 'vast Irish-American invasion', according to William O'Brien, 'sweeping the country with new and irresistible principles of Liberty and Democracy'.⁸¹ Ford's 'Spread the Light' fund allowed emigrant subscribers to send copies to Ireland, causing consternation for the British government as it struggled to restrict the paper's influence.⁸² The paper, which was 'calculated to do much mischief in the hands of an only partially educated and simple-minded peasantry', helped to construct the vision of the Land War as a transformative conflict over natural rights, popular democracy, and the creeping authoritarianism of elite, technocratic rule, discursively restating the conflict as part of a global fight for human freedom.⁸³

III

What was the political impact of such ideas? Their popularity was unquestionable: in the US, the nascent labour movement drew heavily from the political vision espoused during the Land War, due at least in part to the prominent place of Irish-Americans. In Britain, Henry George's *Progress and poverty* remained the most influential work of non-fiction among members of the Labour party at the turn of the century.⁸⁴ On both sides of the Atlantic, Henry Fawcett noted, the nationalization of the land provided the intellectual ballast to support all other socialist commitments, at least up to the mid-1880s.⁸⁵ New York's Central Labor Union, the umbrella organization under which George stood for the city's mayoralty, and that tied together the labour republican Knights of Labor and Marxist Socialist Labor Party, placed land nationalization at the top of its platform, since land was 'the great storehouse from which all wealth is drawn'.⁸⁶ The influence of the

⁷⁸ James J. Greene, 'The impact of Henry George's theories on American Catholics' (Ph.D. thesis, Notre Dame, 1956), p. 80; James P. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his search for America: a case study in Irish-American journalism* (New York, NY, 1976), p. 30.

⁷⁹ *Irish World*, 16 Nov. 1878, 27 Dec. 1879, 23 Apr. 1881, 19 Aug. 1882, 9 Sept. 1882.

⁸⁰ Matthew F. Jacobson, *Special sorrows: the diasporic imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), p. 57; Rodechko, *Patrick Ford*, p. 48.

⁸¹ William O'Brien, *Recollections* (London, 1905), p. 273.

⁸² Henry George to Patrick Ford, 7 Jan. 1882, NYPL, Henry George papers, series I: B.

⁸³ Fanny Parnell, quoted in Ely M. Janis, 'Petticoat revolutionaries: gender, ethnic nationalism, and the Irish Ladies' Land League in the United States', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 27 (2008), p. 21.

⁸⁴ 'The Labour party and the books that helped to make it', *The Review of Reviews*, 33 (1906), p. 571.

⁸⁵ Fawcett, *State socialism*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Matthew Maguire, *Irish World*, 15 July 1882.

Irish Land War specifically can be observed in the Central Labor Union's Declaration of Principles, which was lifted directly from Bishop Nulty's *The land question*. Both documents claimed that

as every individual in every country is a creature and a child of God, and as all his creatures are equal in his sight, any settlement of the land of this or any other country that would exclude the humblest man in that country from his share in the common inheritance would not only be an injustice and a wrong to that man, but would, moreover, be an impious resistance to the benevolent intentions of the Creator.⁸⁷

That this right to a 'share in the common inheritance' rested primarily on the purposive relationship between land and human bodies was reiterated by Fr. Edward McGlynn, the radical New York priest whose support for George and tireless campaigning brought him both immense support and the censure of his superiors. The divine source of each person's right to the land 'requires no parchment to prove', explained McGlynn, but was inalienably rooted in the innate needs of the human body. 'The mere fact that he is here, a human being endowed with this nature is the one indispensable title to this joint, equal usufruct of all the bounties of nature.'⁸⁸

The Irish land question energized radicals on both sides of the Atlantic in part because of the appeal of these foundational principles, and, at the same time, precipitated a reaction against such naturalistic claims to harmony and individual rights even among those sympathetic to a reordering of the Irish land system. The refusal to view land as a distinct form of property was common to conservative, social liberal, and socialist critics alike, freeing it from a purposive relationship with the human body and from claims of natural right. Its political valence dimmed, the question of the possession of land became simply one issue among many to be carefully administered as part of the prudent management of the social problem. Indeed, on this point, responses both to George's plans and to the Irish crisis in the early 1880s were marked by a remarkable conformity that stretched quite widely across the political spectrum. The tory novelist William H. Mallock, in what was one of the most widely read critiques of George, argued that land was like any other form of property in that it was held only on the broad basis of social utility – private property of any type was never such as 'its possessor can be allowed to use in any way he pleases'.⁸⁹ One reviewer noted cogently that there was, in Mallock's critique, 'no principle, nor any detail of argumentative illustration, contained in the

⁸⁷ Declaration of Principles of the Central Labor Union of New York (and platform of the United Labor Party of New York City, 1882 and 1883), published in *Truth*, 17 Apr. 1882; Nulty, *The land question*, p. 14.

⁸⁸ 'Thoughts of Dr. McGlynn', in Sylvester Malone, ed., *Dr Edward McGlynn* (New York, NY, 1918), p. 56.

⁸⁹ William H. Mallock, *Property and progress, or a brief inquiry into contemporary social agitation in England* (New York, NY, 1884), pp. 116–17.

articles which might not well have been written by as thorough-going a Liberal as Mr. Fawcett'.⁹⁰

For socialists like Henry Hyndman, liberals like the MP Samuel Smith, or even the aristocrats of the Liberty and Property Defence League, the resulting calculations of social utility may have been wildly different, but the avowed principle they returned to was the same. Hyndman, leader of the English Social Democratic Federation, explained that the question of rent, which was so fundamental for George and the Irish Land League, was simply a matter of capital and interest, since 'the land is only one of the means of production and...is useless without the others'.⁹¹ Similarly, in Smith's opinion, there was 'no equitable reason why this form of wealth [i.e. land] should not have the protection of the law like all other kinds'.⁹² It was not the general principle of absolute ownership of the soil that was to blame, Smith argued, but the actions of bad owners. In consequence, any solution should avoid generalized pronouncements about the nature of land ownership, and focus instead on more practical and incremental measures the state could take 'to sweeten the lot of our labouring poor...[and] impose any restrictions on landed property that may be shown to be necessary'.⁹³

The expressed opinion of the Liberty and Property Defence League was not dissimilar: 'No one denies that property in land must be held subject to such limitation as the public interest dictates', they explained.⁹⁴ The organization, set up explicitly to resist the agrarian radicalism engendered by George and the Land League, claimed to simply disagree on the public 'expediency' of appropriating rents. 'There is no reason', declaimed one American businessman in a similar response to the agrarian crisis, 'for the division between personal and real property, on the ground that the former is the product of man and the latter created by God'.⁹⁵ Both socialist and conservative opponents believed that George and the Land League's arguments regarding land amounted to an inadequate and inconsistent intermediate position. 'If property in land be not lawful', announced another critic, 'then it is impossible logically to avoid the conclusion that *all other property is theft*'.⁹⁶

Liberal politicians, too, were aware of the critical importance of this claim about the uniqueness of land both to the conflict itself, and what the broader implications would be if the differences between land and other forms of property were not elided. William Harcourt, home secretary during the Land War, laid the blame for the current 'attacks on property' at the feet of 'these misty

⁹⁰ 'Review of *Property and progress, or facts against fallacies*', *London Quarterly Review*, 2 (1884), p. 383.

⁹¹ Henry George and Henry M. Hyndman, 'Socialism and rent-appropriation', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 17 (1885), p. 374.

⁹² Samuel Smith, *The nationalisation of the land* (London, 1884), p. 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁴ Liberty and Property Defence League, *Land* (London, 1885), p. 20.

⁹⁵ J. Bleeker Miller, *Trade organization in politics; also, progress and robbery, an answer to Henry George* (New York, NY, 1887), p. 158.

⁹⁶ Guilford L. Molesworth, *Land as property* (London, 1885), p. 12; George Campbell, duke of Argyll, 'The prophet of San Francisco', in *Property in land*, p. 25.

philosophers', thinkers such as Mill and George, who had often derailed the Liberal party in the past and threatened 'the safety of society'. He rejected the idea that land was a distinct form of property by informing his Glaswegian audience that 'the landowner has just as good a right to a fair rent as you or I have to the coat upon our back'.⁹⁷ Eminent liberals like Henry Fawcett and J. E. Thorold Rogers also shared this frustration at what they saw as the pervasive but erroneous idea that land was a meaningfully different species of property. All questions of ownership, in land or otherwise, were equal insofar as they always 'must yield to considerations of public defence, and even public utility'.⁹⁸ Attempts to nationalize land were therefore not only economically counterproductive but pointless, since the state was already its ultimate owner.⁹⁹

The consequence of this was that critics of all different political persuasions could agree that the radical claims for a natural right to land rooted in the right to life were both archaic and contradictory. As the liberal MP Robert Wallace explained, 'the very wildest schemes of land reform are those which, on the face of them, promise to do most for establishing property as an institution'.¹⁰⁰ The conservative Irish Whig W. E. H. Lecky, found it 'curious' that the 'extreme radical speculation of our time' centred around ideas about land that belonged 'to early and rudimentary stages of society', just as J. A. Hobson was struck by the outdated 'individualist' beliefs of agrarian radicals whose social vision rested precariously 'upon the "natural rights" of the individual'.¹⁰¹ The current fascination, explained Henry Maine in 1885, with 'schemes founded on the assumption that, through legislative experiments on society, a given space of land may always be made to support in comfort the population which from historical causes has come to be settled on it', was an inevitable but dangerous consequence of grounding democratic discourse in an individualist rhetoric of *a priori* natural rights.¹⁰² For Maine, whose central themes in *Popular government* were developed during the early 1880s while he was writing about events in Ireland, as for many others, the influence of Henry George and the Irish Land War 'were like hand in glove'.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ William Harcourt, speech at Glasgow, 25 Oct. 1881, in 'Some further "notes and queries" on the Irish question for the reflective voter', *Publications issued during the year 1887* (Dublin, 1887).

⁹⁸ J. E. Thorold Rogers, *Cobden and modern political opinion: essays on certain political topics* (London, 1873), pp. 107–8.

⁹⁹ J. E. Thorold Rogers, 'Contemporary socialism', *The Contemporary Review*, 47 (1885), p. 58; Henry Fawcett, *Pauperism: its causes and its remedies* (London, 1871), p. 208; Fawcett, *State socialism*, p. 11; Robert Flint, *Socialism* (1894) (2nd edn, London, 1908), pp. 204–6.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Wallace, 'The philosophy of liberalism', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 9 (1881), p. 320.

¹⁰¹ W. E. H. Lecky, *Democracy and liberty*, II (1896) (London, 1913), p. 224; Hobson, 'The influence of Henry George in England', p. 842.

¹⁰² Henry Sumner Maine, *Popular government: four essays* (London, 1885), p. 37.

¹⁰³ Séamas Ó Síocháin, 'Henry Maine and the survival of the fittest', in Séamas Ó Síocháin, ed., *Social thought on Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 68, 73; J. Morrison Davidson, *Concerning four precursors of Henry George and the single tax, as also the land gospel according to Winstanley 'The Digger'* (London, 1899), p. 2.

The explosion of this radical logic into political life in Ireland and beyond induced an equally potent intellectual response which insisted that land had no unique purposive or natural relationship with human life that was politically or economically relevant. Land was defensible as private property in the same way as 'actual capital, just as much as money, coal, iron, cattle, or any other disposable commodity', only insofar as it was 'consistent with the general good'.¹⁰⁴ In endangering property, which was 'the first and most valuable' aspect of 'the progress of civilization', the 'fierce anarchy' of the Land League threatened this general good.¹⁰⁵ As the Prime Minister William Gladstone perceived it, the defining feature of the Land War was the 'confiscation', 'spoliation', and 'sheer rapine' of the Land League, an attack on the rights of property which made it 'a conflict for the very first and elementary principles upon which civil society is constituted'.¹⁰⁶ Protecting political order and public welfare, therefore, meant rejecting any naturalized right to land entirely.

IV

Land was the core intellectual component of radical politics until the 1880s, its centrality extending far beyond the practical demands of rural life.¹⁰⁷ It provided the keystone for what radicals viewed as a morally coherent political economy, a whole cosmology grounded in a belief in natural harmony, the purposiveness of nature, and the origins of value in labour and fertility alone. It was these ideas that were, ultimately, at issue during the Irish Land War, and what catalysed its international significance. The Land War challenged liberal political economy by making the instability of natural rights justifications for the acquisitive possession of land palpable. In conjunction with George's campaigning, the popular articulation of this vision during the conflict elicited an equally firm reaction against these propositions. In this way, the question of land helped to drive both liberals and conservatives further toward an organicist utilitarian politics.

The radical argument that self-preservation was the only basis for the possession of land was based on arguments from human physical necessity and the fixed and bounded character of land, with reference to divine authority. This view, pressed forward by George and articulated so clearly and frequently at Land League meetings, ensured that claims to natural right, when applied to land, were limiting, non-acquisitive, and egalitarian. The focus on the moral purposiveness of the body in nature conceptualized individual rights as distinct from their potential enactment by a polity, yet still naturally restricted by the necessities of other persons. This older radical formulation, which rooted collective emancipation in the individualist 'precept of self-preservation' threatened to upend the social benefits bestowed by the state. This was clearly recognized by progressive liberals like Arnold Toynbee, who

¹⁰⁴ Molesworth, *Land as property*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ W. E. H. Lecky, *Democracy and liberty*, I (1896) (New York, NY, 1903), p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ 'Mr. Gladstone, M.P., on Ireland', *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Oct. 1881.

¹⁰⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (1963) (London, 1981), p. 105.

were keen to warn of the dangers posed by a chimerical focus on stolen land and lost rights, and counselled instead that these were simply ‘problems of administration [that] can be solved if men will only have patience’.¹⁰⁸ While George criticized Gladstone’s Irish Land Act of 1881, which sought to embed possession of land within the apparatus of state management, as designed simply to make ‘landlordism tolerable’, and Devyr lambasted it as fixing in perpetuity the ‘odium’ of landlordism ‘upon that intangible and morally unapproachable thing called “Law”’, social liberals conversely heralded it as transformative, a sign that ‘the era of administration has come’.¹⁰⁹

The 1880s saw the end of radicalism’s dependence on land as the foundation of political economy, and consequently a withering of its corresponding theory of democracy.¹¹⁰ Socialist thinkers, increasingly suspicious of the individualism of ‘rights’ discourses, came to see George’s ideas as not only naïve and inadequate, but regressive and archaic; a ‘conservative, reactionary’ remnant of the labour movement that had been ‘played out’.¹¹¹ The natural right to life and self-preservation which had underpinned radical politics for the previous century had also sustained the claim of a universal right to political participation – a corporeal republicanism. However, this ‘law of nature, prescribing the freedom of equality of all’, according to the Oxford political economist T. H. Green, a leading light of the new social liberalism, had not only erroneously implied a right to life and to land, but actually ‘reversed the true process’ in which the state itself created and legitimized any claims to possession or participation.¹¹² In this way, with the loss of the firmament of land, democracy was also to be reimagined; the ‘precept of self-preservation’ reconstituted as an axiom for the state rather than the individual.¹¹³ Assuming a right to life, and therefore to land and to political power, was a nonsensical extrapolation, since without ‘the power of the state...I literally should not have a life to call my own.’¹¹⁴ As only the state could create order from

¹⁰⁸ Arnold Toynbee, *Progress and poverty, a criticism of Mr. Henry George, being two lectures delivered in St. Andrew’s Hall, Newman Street, London, by the late Arnold Toynbee* (London, 1883), p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Henry George, *Irish World*, 19 Aug. 1881; Thomas Ainge Devyr, *The odd book of the nineteenth century, or, ‘chivalry’ in modern days, a personal record of reform – chiefly land reform, for the last fifty years* (New York, NY, 1882), p. 189; T. H. Green, *Liberal legislation and freedom of contract* (Oxford, 1881), p. 23.

¹¹⁰ Of course, in a global context, concern with access to land remained strong, especially in rural and peasant societies. As Jo Guldi has recently made clear, however, peasant resistance was increasingly channelled toward bureaucratic and managerial solutions that took Gladstone’s 1881 Act as a model rather than a betrayal, and saw land reform as a bulwark for capitalism against communism. Jo Guldi, *The long land war: the global struggle for occupancy rights* (New Haven, CT, 2021), pp. 38, 61–2.

¹¹¹ Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx, *The working class movement in America* (1891), ed. Paul LeBlanc (Amherst, MA, 2000), pp. 203, 171.

¹¹² T. H. Green, *Lectures on the principles of political obligation* (London, 1895), p. 72.

¹¹³ Hodgskin, *The natural and artificial right*, p. 46.

¹¹⁴ Green, *Principles of political obligation*, p. 122.

natural chaos, preserving social stability and ‘civilization’ was always to take precedence over popular participation.¹¹⁵

In this way, the Irish conflict, alongside George’s powerful influence, served to highlight the anarchic dangers latent in natural rights arguments for the land, and the old, radical democratic ideals which grew upon them. Exposing this discordance between liberty and property, it encouraged many liberals to discard older individualistic assumptions so as to protect social order and property, underpinned by recourse to the more elevated principles of progress and civilization. The consequence of this, as J. A. Hobson would explain in the early twentieth century, was an entire revision of ‘the doctrine of Democracy’ away from ‘the old democratic idea of political equality’. He continued: ‘a clear grasp of society as an economic organism completely explodes the notion of property as an inherent individual right’ and, correspondingly, ‘the idea of natural individual rights as the basis of Democracy disappears’. Without such archaic concepts as natural rights, ‘the general will and wisdom of the Society, as embodied in the State’ would now be the driving force of political life, making decisions ‘not on grounds of individual right but of general expediency’.¹¹⁶

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¹¹⁵ Sidney Webb, ‘Historic: the development of the democratic ideal’, in George Bernard Shaw, ed., *Fabian essays in socialism* (London, 1889), p. 58.

¹¹⁶ J. A. Hobson, *The crisis of liberalism: new issues of democracy* (London, 1909), pp. 77–8.

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