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# Earth, property, territory: the birth of an economic concept of land

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Politics  
and International Studies

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*For my dad*

# Table of Contents

|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| <i>Table of Contents</i> .....   | <i>i</i>          |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> .....  | <i>iii</i>        |
| <i>Declaration</i> .....   | <i>iv</i>         |
| <i>Abbreviations of frequently cited works</i> .....   | <i>v</i>          |
| <i>Abstract</i> .....  | <i>vii</i>        |
| <b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....   | <b><i>1</i></b>   |
| Economy and ecology .....  | 4                 |
| The approach of this thesis .....  | 11                |
| Contributions to knowledge .....   | 16                |
| Outline of the thesis structure .....  | 17                |
| <b><i>1 – The longer trajectory of the development of concepts of land within economic thought</i></b> ..... | <b><i>23</i></b>  |
| Introduction.....  | 23                |
| Before political economy .....   | 25                |
| The “classical” view: land as a factor of production .....   | 31                |
| Neoclassicism and the loss of spatiality.....  | 40                |
| Conclusions.....   | 47                |
| <b><i>2 – Philosophy and method</i></b> .....  | <b><i>50</i></b>  |
| Introduction.....  | 50                |
| Historiographical issues within the history of economic thought.....   | 51                |
| Tribe and Foucault: the archaeology of economic thought .....  | 61                |
| Science, materiality, discourse .....  | 70                |
| The method of the present investigation .....  | 76                |
| <b><i>3 – Adam Smith I: Reading The Wealth of Nations</i></b> .....  | <b><i>79</i></b>  |
| Introduction.....  | 79                |
| Smith’s work and its reception.....  | 80                |
| Political œconomy as a science of statecraft.....  | 88                |
| History: natural and civil.....  | 97                |
| Earth, property, and territory as a way of reading land in The Wealth of Nations.....                        | 104               |
| <b><i>4 – Adam Smith II: Land in the register of earth</i></b> .....   | <b><i>110</i></b> |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Introduction.....   | 110        |
| Natural history and the improvement of the earth.....                                     | 114        |
| Labour and subsistence.....   | 118        |
| Space, land use, and a theory of material exchange.....                                   | 125        |
| Conclusion .....  | 129        |
| <b>5 – Adam Smith III: Land in the register of property .....</b>                         | <b>132</b> |
| Introduction.....   | 132        |
| The natural history of property.....  | 134        |
| The civil history of property.....  | 140        |
| Production, circulation, and market exchange .....  | 147        |
| Conclusion .....  | 154        |
| <b>6 – Adam Smith IV: Land in the register of territory .....</b>                         | <b>155</b> |
| Introduction.....   | 155        |
| Territory: subsistence and authority.....   | 158        |
| The theoretical role of territory .....   | 161        |
| An empirical account of territory .....   | 167        |
| Land and the mobilization of territorial wealth through taxation.....                     | 171        |
| Conclusions.....  | 174        |
| <b>7 – David Ricardo’s Principles, and the birth of an economic concept of land .....</b> | <b>177</b> |
| Introduction.....   | 177        |
| Biography and context .....   | 178        |
| Land in the theoretical structure of Ricardo’s <i>Principles</i> .....                    | 181        |
| Rent and agriculture .....  | 181        |
| Distribution, labour, and comparative advantage .....                                     | 188        |
| Analysing the “break” .....   | 199        |
| Conclusion .....  | 208        |
| <b>Conclusions .....</b>  | <b>210</b> |
| Summary of the thesis.....  | 210        |
| Returning to economy and ecology .....  | 216        |
| Materialism and materiality.....  | 220        |
| Final thoughts.....   | 225        |
| <b>Bibliography .....</b>   | <b>229</b> |

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is entirely my own work and no portion of it has been submitted for a degree at another university.

## Abbreviations of frequently cited works

- Astronomy* Smith, A., 2014. ‘The principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries; illustrated by the history of astronomy’, in Wightman, W. P. D., Bryce, J. C., and Ross, I. S. (eds) *The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 3: Essays on philosophical subjects with Dugald Stewart’s Account of Adam Smith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31–105.
- Correspondence* Mossner, E. C. and Ross, I. S. (eds), 2014. *The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 6: Correspondence*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ED Smith, A., 2014 [1759]. ‘Early draft of part of The Wealth of Nations’, in Meek, R. L., Raphael, D. D., and Stein, P. (eds) *The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 5: Lectures on jurisprudence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 562–581.
- EPS Wightman, W. P. D., Bryce, J. C. and Ross, I. S. (eds), 2014. The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 3: Essays on philosophical subjects with Dugald Stewart’s Account of Adam Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LJ(A) Smith, A., 2014. ‘Lectures on Jurisprudence: Report of 1762-3’, in Meek, R. L., Raphael, D. D., and Stein, P. (eds) *The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 5: Lectures on jurisprudence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–394.
- LJ(B) Smith, A., 2014. ‘Lectures on Jurisprudence: Report of 1766’, in Meek, R. L., Raphael, D. D., and Stein, P. (eds) *The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 5: Lectures on jurisprudence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 395–554.
- PPET Ricardo, D., 2004 [1817]. The works and correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol. 1: On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation. Edited by P. Sraffa and M. Dobb. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- TMS Raphael, D. D. and Macfie, A. L. (eds), 2014 [1759]. The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 1: The theory of moral sentiments. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WN Todd, W. B. (ed.), 2014 [1776]. The Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. 2: An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



*Works*

Sraffa, P. and Dobb, M. (eds), 2004 [1951]. *The works and correspondence of David Ricardo, 11 Vols.*. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.

## Abstract

Land is emerging as increasingly central to a range of urgent issues, foremost amongst which are the multiple and overlapping environmental crises that today pose an existential threat to human societies. In this context, economic and ecological logics so often appear to be in tension, if not outright opposition. Yet the recognition of the essential role of land in sustaining human life is far from a new one. Why is it, then, that the theory and practice of economy have come to conceive of land solely in terms of the financial revenues that it can yield, at the expense of a recognition of its broader role as the biophysical foundation of human societies? It is with this question in mind that this thesis investigates the history of the concept of land within economic theory. It focusses, in particular, on the putative birth of modern economic thought in the work of Adam Smith, suggesting that this, in fact, rested on a far richer and more nuanced conception of land than is generally recognized: one that takes into account the evolving nature of the relationship between humans and the nonhuman environment. The research further suggests that subsequent economic thought should be understood instead as following the work of David Ricardo – the most prominent of Smith’s disciples from the following generation of political economists. I argue that, whereas Smith conceived of land in broad natural historical and jurisprudential terms – as earth, property, and territory – Ricardo abstracted away these considerations, in effect creating a new, and recognizably modern, economic concept, which associated land narrowly with rent. In undertaking this investigation, the thesis attempts to cast light on the ways in which the relationship between the human and non-human worlds are understood within today’s (political) economic theory.

# Introduction

Land is surely one of the oldest concerns of political societies. Evidence that the regulation of land has been a perennial object of discourse in settled societies is found as far back as the earliest written records (Ellickson and Thorland 1995). But today, land is at the heart of what appears to be a growing, and increasingly inter-connected set of political and economic issues. In the global North, trends in land ownership in recent decades have been linked to concerns as diverse as housing shortages, financial instability, and rising inequality (Piketty 2014; Ryan-Collins *et al.* 2017; Christophers 2018). Meanwhile in the global South, the period since 2000 has seen a surge of large-scale land investments by states, corporations, and financial institutions, accompanied by accusations that small-scale and traditional users of tens of millions of hectares of land have been expropriated, in what has been called the “global land grab” (McMichael 2012; Allan 2013; Wily 2014; Edelman *et al.* 2017). Linking these trends is what has been referred to as the ongoing “financialization” of land, as land ownership and agricultural commodities are increasingly entangled in global financial networks (Clapp 2014; Gunnoe 2014; Kaika and Ruggiero 2016). Meanwhile, territorial disputes and land reform movements continue to play an important part in politics around the world (Lipton 2009; Brandt and Mkodzongi 2018; Scoones 2018).

Overlaying and interacting with these issues in diverse and complex ways is a raft of ever more pressing ecological concerns to which land, and its use, is central. Two main trends define the parameters of these issues at a global level: the continued growth of human population,<sup>1</sup> and the perpetuation – indeed proliferation – of unsustainable land use practices. These two trends are not unconnected, with many of the ecological problems surrounding land today relating in one way or another to an increasing demand for foodstuffs and other resources, which is driving both increasingly *intensive* and *extensive* forms of land use.<sup>2</sup> Recent years have seen growing awareness of

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<sup>1</sup> A number which has doubled since 1970, and which, even according to the most conservative predictions, is set to increase by at least a further 25% this century (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2017).

<sup>2</sup> See United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (2011)

a range of issues surrounding land use, including the rapid depletion of soils by intensive agriculture (Arsenault 2014; IPBES 2018), pesticide and fertilizer runoff polluting inland waters and seas (United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization 2017), abrupt pollinator decline (United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization 2019), continuing deforestation (NYDF Assessment Partners 2019), and a precipitous loss of global biodiversity since 1970, attributed primarily to habitat loss (WWF 2018). Standing above all of these, perhaps, is the existential threat posed to human societies by climate change, which is both exacerbated by the loss of carbon sequestration from degraded soils and forests, and simultaneously places further pressure on land use through the disruption of weather systems, desertification, and loss of land to rising sea levels.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, a broad and international range of civil society movements has emerged, focussing variously on conservation, sustainable farming practices, re-wilding projects, and land reform, many of which move from an explicit acknowledgement of the inter-connectedness of the political, economic, and ecological questions surrounding land today.

Unsurprisingly, within contemporary academia, there are a diverse set of literatures dealing with these and a range of other land-related issues. But different subject fields adopt widely divergent theoretical perspectives on what the object at hand actually *is*. Neoclassical economists, for example, have tended to view land straightforwardly as a form of capital, infinitely fungible with other forms of productive resource, abstracting away much of the specificity of land's role in economic processes. Those, such as economic geographers, interested in land use patterns have gravitated towards rent theory, seeing land in spatial terms, as a relationship between location and value (Ryan-Collins *et al.* 2017). Meanwhile scholars within politics have talked mostly in terms of land ownership, and its contestation, treating land as an object over which rights are held. Whilst recent critical work has investigated the relationship between land and territory (Elden 2013b; Hall 2013; Duer 2017), for the most part, the treatment of land across both politics and economics is unified by the (either implicit or explicit) understanding that land is essentially a form of human property, with the range of perspectives following from this premise. By contrast, ecologists have a quite different appreciation of what land is. From an ecological perspective, land is a not a unitary object, but a composite of material, biophysical components, the inter-relation of which is

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<sup>3</sup> The centrality of land use practices to climate change has been emphasized by the International Panel on Climate Change's most recent report, the short title of which is *Climate Change and Land* (IPCC 2019)

of prime concern.

On one level, the thing being discussed in each case might ultimately be the same, but such widely divergent theoretical lenses lead us to “see” land in very different ways. Each of these perspectives may have much to add to understandings of land issues. But the kinds of issues faced today are increasingly ones that transgress established intellectual boundaries between politics, economics, and ecology in complex ways. Over recent decades, a number of emergent academic fields have begun thinking through the inter-relation of these fields, including political ecology, environmental history, and environmental and ecological economics. But it is only more recently that calls to build a more unified field of social science befitting of contemporary problems are beginning to bear fruit (Spash 2017). However, when it comes to understandings of land in such a project, it is unclear that a straightforwardly additive approach is sufficient. Simply combining various of the above perspectives may yield significant insights, but ultimately, to adjudicate between the competing claims of such widely divergent theoretical perspectives will require a much more detailed and sustained interrogation of land as a concept than has been undertaken to date.

It is at this point that the present thesis seeks to intervene, suggesting that divergent theoretical conceptions of land today can only be properly understood through a thoroughgoing investigation of their historical development. The thesis addresses one part of this puzzle by looking at what seems a particularly critical development, the emergence of political economic understandings of land in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Conventional narratives posit this as the period of “classical” economics, in which land plays an important role – with labour and capital – as one of three distinct “factors of production”. The centrality of agriculture here is commonly recognized. But this “factor of production” view is one that pre-assumes that land is conceived, as in later economic thought, not in physical terms, or in terms of the role of land in sustaining human life in general, but rather solely in terms of monetary value – as that which yields a rent to its owner.

This thesis starts from the observation that Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* – a text whose publication in 1776 marks the putative birth of modern economic thought – seems to exhibit a significantly richer conception of land. It argues that, in Smith’s work, land was conceived as far

more than a “factor of production”. Rather, land was understood, first and foremost, in terms of an evolving material relationship between human beings and the earth, one mediated both by relations of property and by the governance of territory. Land was the basis of a society’s material subsistence, and even its laws. Moreover, for Smith, understanding land in this way was by no means incidental to the science of “political œconomy”, but in fact was key to understanding the nature of “durable” wealth. The thesis investigates Smith’s approach to land in some detail, looking variously at the intellectual, political, and epistemological concerns involved. It goes on to argue that it was not here, but in the work of Smith’s most prominent disciple of the following generation, David Ricardo, that we find the emergence of what we might call, in disciplinary terms, a properly modern economic concept of land.

This introductory chapter will expand on some of the claims made here. The first section looks in greater detail at the concepts of economy and ecology, and the tension between economic and ecological conceptions of land. Section two summarizes the basic research questions, the method adopted taken here, and the work on which this draws, before going on to detail the specific contributions to knowledge made by this investigation. Finally, section three provides a summary of the chapter structure of the thesis.

## **Economy and ecology**

It is, in particular, the gap between economy and ecology that motivates the present thesis. In the contemporary world, these terms denote logics that so often appear to be in tension, if not outright opposition. Economic processes are inexorably linked to problems of ecological degradation at a wide variety of scales, whilst the ecologically damaging actions of governments are frequently justified on grounds of economic necessity. Yet, as is becoming ever more starkly visible today, ecological systems are absolutely fundamental to all economic processes. Ecological degradation thus imperils the very economic foundations of human societies.

In the neoliberal era, a specifically “economic” rationality has come to be understood narrowly in terms of a logic of competition (Davies 2014). Yet this is far from the etymological origin of the

word. In fact, it is striking that the words “economy” and “ecology” hint at a common concern, both sharing a root in the Greek word *oikos* (household). Economy derives from the Greek *oikonomia* – a term used by Aristotle and other classical writers. This can be translated as the law or management of the household (*oikos* + *nomos*), and is a term with a long and continuous history from Greek antiquity to today.<sup>4</sup> The term ecology, by contrast, is a much more recent invention, attributed to German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, whose word *ökologie* implies a Grecian descent (*oikos* + *logos* suggesting the study of the household), despite being a neologism when it was coined in 1873. Ancient Greek *oikonomia* was a discourse which treated the management of the household in a holistic sense, including not only the prudent distribution of material resources, but the moral order of the household. For Aristotle, *oikonomia* was to be distinguished from *chrematismos*, the latter denoting a sphere beyond the household in which the business of trade and money-getting was conducted. Instead, *oikonomia* placed limits on the excessive consumption of a wealth assumed to be always-already abundant in nature (Leshem 2016b, 230).

Whilst contemporary senses of the term economy have maintained the sense of a prudent use of resources, in many ways, modern uses diverge significantly. Notions of “the economy”, conceived as an object in its own right, seem to imply something closer to *chrematismos* – a sphere of monetary exchange. Furthermore, “the economy” is not today understood as a sphere in which excessive consumption is to be limited. On the contrary, through the twentieth century, the maximization of consumption within this sphere has increasingly come to be a primary focus of governmental attention.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is precisely such a focus on increasing the sphere of exchange above all else that today seems to be in stark tension with the urgent need to safeguard the ecological foundations of human existence on earth. Whilst on a purely etymological level there remains the sense that economy and ecology both refer to ways of looking at the *oikos*, in practice, these frequently seem

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<sup>4</sup> The longer history of the concept of economy has recently been the subject of a debate between Giorgio Agamben (2011) and Dotan Leshem (2016c, 2016a). Following from Foucault’s (2009 [1977–1978]) lectures on “governmentality”, this traces the long history of the concept from the ancient Greek writers through notions of economy as the history of salvation in the Christian church. Work focussing on the history of the concept of economy since the early modern period includes Tribe (2015) and the various contributors to Schabas and de Marchi (2003) (see also Schabas (2009, ch.1) and Walter (2011), based on Tribe (1978)).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that such notions of “the economy”, as an object in its own right, are a relatively recent invention, not being seen until well into the nineteenth century. As Margaret Schabas (2009, chap. 1) notes, such an idea would have meant little to the authors writing prior to this time. Keith Tribe (2015, chap. 3) has recently argued that it was not until the innovations in the statistical measurement of GDP around the second world war that a firm basis was provided on which “the economy” could become a privileged object of governmental action.

to denote opposed logics.

It would, of course, be a mistake to attempt to draw overly straightforward links between economics, as a body of knowledge, and “the economy” as an object of governmental attention and popular political discourse. Indeed, as Matthew Watson (2014) has argued, mainstream neoclassical economics has become focussed on highly abstract and formalized “model economies”, whose existence can be recognized only in purely theoretical terms. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the way in which “the economy” is today conceived rests on a long series of developments in the history of economic theory.

Christian Marouby has recently suggested that, as bodies of knowledge, both economics and ecology have historically both been importantly concerned with *The Question of Limits* (2019). Viewed in this way, he suggests that it is no wonder that the two disciplines are instinctively so adverse:

While as objective sciences both devoted to the study of the fundamental ways in which humans live in and from their “home,” economics and ecology are in principle not only compatible, but could in some reconciled future be thought as one discipline, it is easy to see how their original and by now almost unconscious orientation with regards to limits propels them in opposite directions. Ecology, born out of protective allegiance to the natural environment, insists above all that we respect its unchanging limits. Economics, resolutely anthropocentric, is designed to free us from those limits in order to achieve infinite progress. (*ibid.*, 10)

This, as we will see, may be in need of some qualification. Nevertheless, this formulation does seem to capture something important about the contrasting views of the human relation to the *oikos* implied by economics and ecology. Economics has come to be associated with a logic of perpetual growth, whilst ecology implies the need to respect, above all, the limitations of the ecological systems on which human life depends.

We can expand on, but also qualify Marouby’s statement by turning to the primary focus of this thesis, land. Land represents a crucial (if not *the* crucial) meeting point of economy and ecology, both in terms of its centrality to economic and ecological processes, and as a concept within the respective bodies of theory. Implicitly, then, in looking for the common ground between economics and ecology, we might surmise that land must be a key facet of the *oikos* which both



disciplines propose to analyse. But the conceptions of land in these respective bodies of theory are widely divergent.

To illuminate this divergence, it is helpful to draw attention first to a distinction between ecology and another term with which it is commonly associated both in popular and scholarly discourses, that of environment. Notions of the environment as referring to the nonhuman or “natural” world post-date the birth of ecology, and are today much contested (Alston 2016). Nevertheless, much green commentary in recent years has sought to problematize the concept as a way of conceiving of the relationship between human societies and the nonhuman world. David Harvey (1996, 118), for example, has argued that environmentalism implies an “external and often managerial stance” towards its object, as opposed to ecologism, which views human activities as irreducibly embedded in nature. The conceptual distinction has been neatly summarized recently by Ryan Katz-Rosene and Matthew Paterson:

Environment is a term that denotes the relationship between a place and its surroundings, and by extension when we think environmentally, we, intentionally or otherwise, are thinking about processes where human activity ‘interacts’ with the environment but is not fundamentally ‘within’ it... Ecology, by contrast, is first and foremost a science of systems and internal relations, and thus human activity is an integral part of the processes by which ecological systems are created, transformed and sometimes destroyed. (Katz-Rosene and Paterson 2018, pp. 5–6)

In this view, notions of environment imply the fundamental separability and exteriority of this sphere from that of the human. Thus environmental discourses threaten to perpetuate an unhelpful, indeed perhaps dangerous, conceptual separation between the human and nonhuman world. To put this in the terms provided by Bruno Latour’s influential work, such discourses posit a “nature-culture divide” (Latour 1993).

I suggest that we can identify a specifically “environmental” conception of land in what have been termed neo-Malthusian arguments, such as the Club of Rome’s famous *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows 1972). Like Malthus’ original *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Malthus 2010 [1798]), such arguments have sought to link absolute population levels to absolute land availability. Whilst it is undeniable that the availability of land worldwide must ultimately impose limits on population, critics have suggested that the question is far more complex, and more political, than such a phrasing of the problem suggests. Traditional Marxist critiques have emphasized that this kind of

discourse fails to capture important distributional effects which lead to parts of the global population consuming to excess whilst others starve (Galtung 1973; Sandbach 1978, 507). In this sense, top-down, narrowly quantitative discourses like the limits thesis can promote a fatalism whereby excessive population will be subject to inevitable natural “checks” which maintain levels within planetary boundaries, ignoring the question of whether a more equitable redistribution of resources could forestall such a human calamity. On the other hand, more ecologically-inspired critiques point to how such flat, quantitative conceptions of resource limits ignore key questions of actual land use practices and associated ecologies which ultimately determine sustainability in the long term. From this perspective, one-dimensional views of land simply in terms of productive output are as problematic as the one-dimensional views of population that are the object of traditional Marxist critiques (e.g. Taylor and García-Barrios 1999).

What, instead, might an ecological conception of land look like? The work of Aldo Leopold, though now old, is still illuminating in this respect. Leopold invites us to think of land not as a unitary entity, but rather as a collective one. Land, he suggests, is really a composite term, comprising a set of elements such as soils, waters, plants, and animals – elements that, together with humans, should be regarded as parts of a “community” (Leopold 1968 [1949], 204). Such understandings of land as composite inform other ecologically-influenced definitions which today play a role in global environmental governance. The detailed description developed by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, is instructive here, defining land as:

a delineable area of the earth's terrestrial surface, encompassing all attributes of the biosphere immediately above or below this surface including those of the near-surface climate, the soil and terrain forms, the surface hydrology (including shallow lakes, rivers, marshes, and swamps), the near-surface sedimentary layers and associated groundwater reserve, the plant and animal populations, the human settlement pattern and physical results of past and present human activity (terracing, water storage or drainage structures, roads, buildings, etc.). (United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization 1995, 2)

What is striking here is how expansive the definition is. We can see an attempt to capture as holistically as possible the kinds of features that determine the physical make-up of a specific portion of land. There is a strong sense of the spatiality and materiality of land: it is both “a delineable area of the earth's terrestrial surface”, and an imagined three-dimensional configuration of physical components. More than this, the arrangement of these components cannot be arbitrary, but the existence of each element is dependent on others. Such a definition thus has the

capacity to draw attention to how this configuration of elements might change, and the consequences of such changes.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, dominant paradigms within economic theory avoid engaging with the material or spatial aspects of land at all.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, economic theory since the later nineteenth century has increasingly converged around the consensus that land can be conceived as a form of capital. This view sees land as a productive resource, but no more so than other forms of capital goods. Such a conception rests on the prior assumption that economic analysis is concerned not with the physicality of such resources, but solely with matters of exchangeable value. Thus, in modern economic theory, land is visible only insofar as it embodies a value, and may confer a revenue to its owner, like any other productive resource. As a number of commentators have recognized, such an abstracted concept of land – one that views it purely in terms of exchangeable value – has allowed land effectively to be written out of modern economic analysis.<sup>8</sup> Today, mainstream economics works theoretically on a two factor – labour and capital – analysis of production, whilst, as a substantive concern, land is relegated to a number of specialist subdisciplines.

A recent attempt to re-open a conversation about the role of land in economic analysis has focussed on the need to recognize land as a distinctive “factor of production” in its own right – an idea which, as we will see in Chapter One, was prevalent through much of the nineteenth century. But even this adopts a perspective that explicitly excludes land’s materiality, the authors stating directly,

[b]y land we don’t mean physical earth and rock, we mean locational space. (Ryan-Collins *et al.* 2017, 1)

Here “locational space” refers to the position and extent of a given piece of land which are of interest only insofar as these factors affect the sale or rental value. In practice, this might mean

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<sup>6</sup> The FAO’s definition informs both qualitative and quantitative assessments of the state of the world’s land, though, in this context, quantification rests on ecological typologies which are themselves objects of contestation (see La Via Campesina *et al.* 2014).

<sup>7</sup> By dominant paradigms, I refer above all to neoclassical economics, which has achieved a hegemonic status within recent decades. But the comment applies equally to many of the significant heterodoxies, including, most prominently, Keynesianism.

<sup>8</sup> As will be investigated further in Chapter One, the “disappearance” of land from economic theory has been a key concern for those working in the tradition of the late nineteenth-century economist Henry George, amongst whom Mason Gaffney has been perhaps the most vocal about the neglect of land, and its relegation as a theoretical and substantive concern from (particularly neoclassical) economic analysis (Gaffney 1994, 2008).

paying attention to considerations such as proximity to urban centres or transport infrastructure, or the use restrictions placed by governmental authorities on a given plot. Such a conception is very useful for understanding the distributional dynamics associated with land's ownership and use, and indeed similar spatial models have been influential within economic geography. Yet any sense of land in its biophysical aspect remains absent.

But why should it necessarily be the case that economics is so uninterested in land's materiality? Is it impossible to imagine an economics in which this is not the case? A orthodox response to these questions might be to say that a consideration of land's materiality simply does not fall within the domain of economic thought, that economics is a branch of knowledge whose tools rest precisely on an abstraction away from the materiality of everyday things into the sphere of financial calculability. Moreover, through its "environmental" and "resource" sub-disciplines, modern economics has already found ways of parsing problems of destruction of the natural world in a manner broadly commensurate with existing theories and methodologies of the field (Gómez-Baggethun *et al.* 2010).

There is, of course, significant truth to these claims, and it is far beyond the scope – and indeed the intention – of this thesis to provide anything like a thoroughgoing critique of economic methodology. Nevertheless, the present moment invites us to raise questions about some of the fundamental categories of economic thought. Economics, according to many observers and increasing numbers of its own students and practitioners, is a discipline in "crisis", a crisis which is one of legitimacy as a result of the failure of dominant economic models and pedagogy to address pressing contemporary issues (e.g. Stiglitz 2016; Fredona and Reinert 2018, vii; Mearman, Berger and Guizzo 2019, 1; Simms 2019). Surely most urgent amongst these issues are those associated with the contemporary ecological crisis.

It is in this context that the present work raises the question of the development of land as a conceptual category within economic thought. It argues that, at the putative birth of economic thought, in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, what we might today understand as the economic and ecological concerns associated with human societies were not separated, but were in fact understood as irreducibly intertwined, and that land, conceived in material terms, was the central

conceptual category through which these concerns were made legible. What we can now recognize as a specifically “economic” conception of land, therefore, was subject to its own historical development, and can be seen to emerge instead in the work of David Ricardo. But Ricardo’s move to conceiving of land in purely monetary terms rests on a set of contingent abstractions which simultaneously push land, in its “ecological” aspect, beyond the purview of analysis.

## **The approach of this thesis**

The tension between “economic” and “ecological” understandings of land thus represents a crucial starting point for thinking about the role of land in the history of economic thought. But the aim here is not to trace in any direct manner the connection and disconnection of these domains through that history. Given the more recent heritage of ecology as a concept, such an approach would present methodological problems, risking to impose anachronistic concerns on earlier texts. Rather I choose to focus more directly on land as a concept in its own right, and its role in the emergence of political economy as a body of knowledge. How does a specifically economic concept of land come to be born? Why does this reduce land solely to the revenues that it can yield? What assumptions lay behind this abstraction? These are the questions that this study poses, and in this section I will outline in broad terms the approach taken to answering them, and how this differs from existing literatures that touch on the topic.

It is fair to say that, compared to other important concepts in economic thought, land has been subject to a significant neglect by historians of the discipline. Various reasons for this are dealt with in Chapters One to Three of this thesis. But, as argued in Chapter Two, a key cause must surely be the continued allegiance of so many historians of economic thought to the modern discipline of economics. Since land has all but disappeared as a concept within dominant strands of economic theory today, the history of the concept perhaps seems of little importance to understanding the contemporary discipline. Whilst there is a specific tradition following the work of the late nineteenth century economist Henry George in which the “disappearance” of land from subsequent neoclassical economics is a major concern (Folvary 1994; Gaffney and Harrison 1994), this rarely receives significant commentary within the broader history of economic thought

literature.

This is not to say, of course, that land does not feature at all within histories of economic thought. On the contrary, any history that deals with authors of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must by necessity deal with the centrality of land to the theories of this period. A few authors discuss the development of value theories, including the historical problem of calculating the parity between land and labour inputs to production (Schumpeter 1994 [1954]; Robbins 1998 [1979]; Vaggi and Groenewegen 2002). However, for the most part, land has been discussed exclusively in relation to the development of theories of rent. The association of land and rent is an important one, featuring prominently in what is often termed the “classical political economy” of the earlier nineteenth century. Whilst the development of theories of rent has received a lot of attention, however, as a concept in its own right, land has been almost entirely ignored.

There are a number of more recent contributions that do provide a partial exception to this narrow treatment of land. Historical investigations by those hailing from the subdisciplines of environmental and ecological economics have paid greater attention to the role of land in the development of economic theory (Kula 1998; Bleischwitz 2001; Gómez-Baggethun *et al.* 2010). This work does significantly broaden conventional discussions of land within the history of economic thought, particularly by addressing the idea of land as a “natural resource”. However, much of this work lacks detail, and pays little attention to historical method, relying instead on the conceptual language of more recent economics. Some of this overlaps with a related recent literature on the concept of “nature” in the history of economic thought (Nadeau 2003; Schabas 2003, 2009; Gammon 2010; Erreygers 2017; Wolloch 2017). Whilst similar criticisms apply to some of this literature, the work of Margaret Schabas stands out, and has contributed to broadening the scope of understandings of the history of economic thought. However, whilst this work touches on land, the focus is clearly on the breadth of nature as a concept, and as such does not deal with land in concept in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

Two more critical contributions, however, do stand out for their explicit focus on land. Keith

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<sup>9</sup> On the breadth and slipperiness of the concept of nature, see Clarence Glacken (1967), and, more recently, Noel Castree (2005).

Tribe's *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse* (1978) is distinctive for its avowedly "discursive" approach, which distinguishes it from the purely theoretical approaches of conventional histories of economic thought. This foregrounds the conceptual configurations that distinguished early nineteenth century political economy from the various discourses commonly claimed as its fore-runners. The work remains very useful on a number of levels. However, in spite of the title, the central argument is about the emergence of "economic discourse" rather than land *per se*. Whilst some of the commentary on land is helpful, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of relations of property in defining the conceptual configurations of economics and its forebears, it does not provide a detailed account of land as a concept in its own right, and in some respects repeats the reduction of land to rent seen in conventional histories. In particular, although engaging with property as a set of concrete practices, Tribe's discursive account of political economy and its fore-runners ignores entirely the questions of land's materiality which is so central to the present investigation.

More recently, Todd Mei has offered *Land and the given economy* (Mei 2017). This critically engages with Tribe's work in an attempt to provide what Mei terms a "hermeneutic retrieval" of the concept of land in classical and neoclassical economics. In contrast to other work, this does engage with land on a conceptual level. It takes the distinctive approach of developing a phenomenological account of land, based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which is then mobilized to counter the conflation of land and capital in neoclassical economics. This argues, in common with the Georgist literature, for a recognition of land's specificity as a distinct "factor of production" in its own right. Though the phenomenological account of land is compelling and useful in its own right, drawing particular attention to the role of land as "ground, the historical component of the investigation does not add significantly to standard accounts of land in the history of economic thought.

A final strand of literature which must be mentioned here is the corpus of contextual historical work that has touched on the canon of economic thought in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is a body of literature influenced by the "Cambridge School" approach to the history of political thought, following the work of Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. Since the later 1970s, a series of contributions, in which the work of István Hont is particularly crucial, have

developed a much greater understanding of the intellectual context in which the political economic thought of the Enlightenment and the period immediately following was born. None of this work is directly focussed on land, though a number of pieces are very helpful in contextualizing various aspects of contemporary debates around land (Winch 1978; Hont 1983; Smout 1983; Hont and Ignatieff 2010 [1983]). More recently, however Frederik Jonsson has expanded the remit of this literature to include a more specifically environmental focus (Jonsson 2010, 2013). Emphasizing the links between political economy and natural history in particular, Jonsson's account draws attention to a far broader set of concerns motivating Enlightenment authors than is suggested within conventional histories of economic thought.

My approach draws on all of these literatures, but is distinctive in placing land as a concept within economic theory at the centre of analysis. It focusses in particular on the work of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. In doing so, it follows a chronology suggested by Keith Tribe's *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse*, but which was originally put forward in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (Foucault 2002 [1966]). This sees Ricardo's work as marking the completion of an epistemological break with earlier discursive traditions, and is explored in greater detail in Chapter Two. Both of these books are of a much greater scope than the present investigation, analysing the work of a wide variety of authors, and over a far more expansive chronology, and, as such, my work offers no way to adjudicate the broader claims made here. However, whilst my own interpretation of the role of land in Smith's work diverges from Tribe significantly, the central argument I make here parallels those of Tribe and Foucault at least formally by positing Ricardo's concept of land as constituting a "break" with that of Smith.

The similarities in approach are not solely formal, however. Like both Tribe and Foucault I am centrally concerned with the conceptual configurations that give shape to particular discursive structures. Although only two authors form the core of my investigation, a focus on discourse nevertheless serves to orient the work away from two alternative kinds of readings. Firstly, it avoids the tendency, noted above, of many historians of economic thought to read historical authors in the conceptual terms provided by more recent economics. Secondly, it mitigates against a narrow focus on authorial intention which has characterized some of the more historicist literature. The study further draws on Foucault's notion of genealogy. Following the approach of



Stuart Elden's recent work on territory (Elden 2010, 2013a, 2013b), I adopt an approach that is broadly genealogical, but which makes use of a range of textual and contextual tools. Although the central focus here is on land as a concept, I heed Elden's suggestion that it is important to pay attention to the relationship between word, concept, and practice. In what follows, therefore, I pay particular attention to a broad array of practices that inform the theoretical apprehensions of land expressed by both Smith and Ricardo, as well as looking at how the authors themselves engage with these practices in their writing.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in addressing the question of land's materiality, the thesis can be seen to engage with number of recent "turns" in scholarship across the social sciences and humanities, including, variously, those towards "materiality", "space", "ecology", and the "nonhuman" (Grusin 2015a). In their own right, each of these has entailed significant debate and theoretical reflection. As such, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with the philosophical aspects of these terms in great detail – although I do look briefly at some of the "new materialist" literature in Chapter Two. I have already touched on the concepts of ecology, space, and materiality in the previous section. However, given the importance of these terms to the arguments of the thesis it is worth briefly saying something about how I understand the relationship between these concepts.

A dictionary definition of "materiality" suggests the word denotes simply "the quality of being composed of matter". However, the recent scholarly turn to materiality moves from the idea that paying attention to the materiality of the world is a pre-requisite for thinking ecologically (e.g. Bennett 2010). Indeed, such an idea was already suggested in the previous section when I looked at economic and ecological understandings of land. An ecological concept of land, I argued, is one which recognizes it as a set of material components. I also suggested that implicit within this was a notion that these components were arranged in a spatial configuration. Materiality, then, as I understand it, already presupposes some sense of spatiality. The same does not apply in reverse, however: a spatial concern does not necessarily translate into a material one. Indeed, conceptions of space vary widely (Warf and Arias 2009; Nieuwenhuis and Crouch 2017), and, as we will see in

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that, in seeking to mobilize insights from the history of economic thought to cast light on present day issues, my work should also be understood as following in the footsteps of a number of contemporary scholars of political economy (Davies 2010, 2014; Gammon 2010; Dale 2012, 2013; Clarke 2015; Watson 2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2018).

Chapter One, some notions of spatiality are highly abstract. Although the specific term “materiality” has only recently become the object of concerted scholarly attention, notions of matter and the material are ancient ones.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, central to the claims made here is the argument that, within Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, land was understood in resolutely material terms. The following chapters attempt to retrieve this understanding, and it is, I suggest, in particular through a focus on practice that this materiality is made visible.

### Contributions to knowledge

Although the substantive concern here is with economic theory, the approach of this thesis crosses a number of different disciplines. As such the intended contributions operate on a number of levels that are not sited neatly within a single subject field. The following contributions may therefore be of interest, variously, to intellectual historians, historians of science, historians of economic thought, those concerned with the history of ecological ideas, economists, philosophers, geographers, and political and social theorists more broadly.

1. The substantive history of thought investigation undertaken here provides a much more thoroughgoing account of the concept of land within Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* than is to be found in the extant literature, one which adds to work attempting to counter persistent tendencies towards readings of Smith’s work in terms provided by later economic theory. In doing so, it simultaneously contributes to a reinterpretation of this key canonical work, placing land and its materiality at the centre of Smith’s analysis. This reading demonstrates that here – at the putative birth of modern economic thought – what we might today understand as the economic and ecological concerns associated with human societies were in fact understood as irreducibly intertwined. Furthermore, land, conceived both as a facet of natural world, and in terms of a diverse array of social practices, was the conceptual category through which these were bound together.
2. The thesis adds to understandings of the history of economic thought more broadly by

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<sup>11</sup> John Bellamy Foster’s discussion of the importance of materialism to Marx’s *Ecology* (Foster 2000, pp. 2–9) is useful for pointing to the ancient origins of this philosophy. Foster’s account challenges the conventional interpretation of the term in relation to Marx, which associates it with an economic determinism. In this thesis, I do not engage with the concept of “materialism” directly, since this is a more complicated and contentious term, which, moreover, is not central to the claims made here. Chapter two does make it clear, however, that my focus on materiality does not imply (as some materialist philosophies do) a priority of the material over the ideal.

identifying a “break” between Smith’s conception of land, and that found in the work of David Ricardo. Whilst avowedly basing his theory on Smith’s, Ricardo’s political economy in fact established itself on a radically new conceptual terrain, one in which only the returns yielded by land to its owner are analytically relevant. Ricardo thus created a new and recognizably modern economic concept of land, defining a specifically economic domain of analysis precisely by separating the monetary flows associated with land from a broader consideration of land’s role in sustaining life and human societies as a whole. In doing so, he laid key foundations for the subsequent trajectory of economic thought, and the ultimate relegation of land as an object of economic analysis.

3. My reading of *The Wealth of Nations* posits that Smith’s concept of land here can be understood to operate in three inter-related “registers” – as earth, property, and territory. This schema is intended as a heuristic device, designed to elucidate aspects of the text that may otherwise be difficult to discern. Nevertheless, the strategy demonstrates an alternative to dominant (political) economic conceptions of land that helps to make visible the complex nature of land both as a concept and as part of the social world. As such, this may be of use for those seeking to do further conceptual work around land, including additional work on the treatment of land within existing bodies of theory. In particular, through the theoretical framework adopted here, the schema offers a way of thinking through the relationship between land as a concept and the diversity of social practices, both discursive and non-discursive, which make it legible.
4. In conducting a genealogy of land, a key concept through which the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds is understood, the thesis aims to contribute to current efforts to rethink the foundations of contemporary economic theory. In particular, it raises questions about the necessity and validity of basing economic theory on a purely monetary conception of land. In addition to its genealogical content, the substantive work done on Adam Smith may offer avenues for further investigation. In particular, it offers a counterpoint to the recent eco-Marxist tradition which positions Marx as the sole “ecological” thinker in the canon of political economy.

## Outline of the thesis structure

Chapter one looks at changing understandings of land in the longer trajectory of economic thought. This has three main aims. Firstly, it helps to situate the narrower chronology which is the main focus of the subsequent chapters by looking both at those discourses commonly understood as pre-cursors of political economy, and at the development of conceptions of land in post-Ricardian economics. Secondly, it explores the argument that land subsequently “disappeared” from economic thought, looking in particular at the changing conceptions of land informing the emergence of neoclassical economics in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thirdly, in doing so, it substantiates the claim that land, following Ricardo, has been reduced narrowly to the revenues that it yields, or its “factor returns”. In exploring these claims, I also introduce the idea of Ricardian political economy as marking a “break” in economic thought, an argument which will be developed through the rest of this thesis.

Chapter two examines the distinctive philosophical and methodological questions arising from the present investigation. In particular, it looks at a set of historiographical problems arising from the study of the history of economic thought. It suggests that in understanding the nature of land as a concept in political economic theory, it is necessary to pay attention to the act of theorizing and particularly its relation to notions of science. Historians of economic thought have overwhelmingly allowed their readings of historical texts to be influenced by the conceptual language of subsequent economic thought, displaying a persistent tendency towards positivistic notions of science. Approaches influenced by the history of political thought, by contrast, are much more sensitive to the necessity of retrieving the specific conceptual language of the texts investigated, but tend to overlook or entirely relativize the scientific aspirations of authors. Instead, I propose that Foucault provides the best conceptual and methodological tools for investigating historically shifting scientific rationalities. I further suggest that Karen Barad’s more recent work on the philosophy of science, which draws on Foucault, is helpful in specifying more precisely the relationship between discourse and practice. Following Stuart Elden’s work on territory, I suggest that paying attention to the role of practice is helpful in understanding changing conceptions of land.

Chapter three introduces Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Picking up on historiographical

issues identified in Chapter Two, it looks at the ways in which the work has been conventionally read and how these readings have contributed to a neglect of Smith's extensive commentary on land. Outlining and contextualizing some of the key arguments of the work, I suggest that the theoretical edifice Smith builds should be understood not, as conventional readings suggest, as first and foremost an account of market exchange, but rather as an attempt to explain the nature of societal subsistence. This is an essentially historical question for Smith, and one irreducibly concerned with the materiality of human existence on the earth. A portion of the chapter therefore examines Smith's very particular employment of historical reasoning, especially drawing attention to the distinction between his use of an avowedly scientific, conjectural form of historical reasoning that contemporaries understood as a form of "natural history", and more conventional narrative history. The final part of the chapter outlines a heuristic device through which, I suggest we can understand how Smith conceives of land. This proposes three overlapping "registers" in which his discussion of land is conducted – earth, property, and territory – which will be investigated independently in the following chapters.

Chapter four addresses the first of these registers in which Smith discusses land, that which I term "earth". It proposes, in particular, that this is linked to a natural historical view of societies and their development, which foregrounds the materiality of human subsistence, and its shifting relation to the nonhuman environment. Whilst the production of commodities is a key part of subsistence for modern "commercial" societies, the chapter demonstrates that Smith's account of subsistence is not limited to commodity production. On the contrary, he devotes a great deal of attention to how, in the different stages of society, goods are procured from the earth, and to the process by which, in commercial society, different goods are progressively brought into the sphere of production. This contributes to an account of progressive land use change in which Smith also demonstrates an attention to problems of soil fertility. I argue that, of the three registers I propose, the earth register is crucial, since it is here that we find a conception of subsistence as a "material exchange" – both that between humans, and between humans and the earth itself – in a process that we can understand to be mediated by practices associated with both property and territory.

Chapter five moves to the second register in which Smith speaks of land within *The Wealth of Nations*, that of "property". This argues that Smith's understanding of property is absolutely

continuous with the material conception of human subsistence demonstrated in his earth register., his comments showing that property relations are understood as a social practice mediating the relationship between humans and the earth. Property in land of course plays a crucial factor in this mediation. But this is not the only consideration when trying to understand the broader role of land in Smith's theory. Rather *all* forms of property – and by extension both commodities and capital – are, for Smith, conceived as ultimately the products of land. Understanding this is, I suggest, crucial to comprehending the way Smith discusses market exchange. Markets, in this view, are just one aspect of the broader sphere of material exchange that I suggested in Chapter Four was at the heart of Smith's earth register. In this way, land is revealed to be central to the theoretical construction of the work as a whole.

Chapter six looks at the third and final of the registers of land, that of “territory”. This extends the argument of the previous two chapters by suggesting that territory provides an additional level of mediation to the processes of material exchange made visible within Smith's earth register. As property mediates exchange relations at the level of the individual, so territory does at the level of the state. But territory, for Smith, is not solely the sum total of the land it encompasses; nor is it simply a container for the production and trade that occur within it. Rather, in Smith's work, territory can be understood as comprising a diverse set of practices, which are variously legal, technical, and administrative in nature. These practices can be understood as mediating the material exchanges that constitute societal subsistence in diverse ways. But territory adds an additional level of complexity, because it simultaneously comprises the practices that make visible processes of exchange. Land again emerges as central to these practices, demonstrating not only its theoretical, but its epistemic centrality within Smith's work.

Chapter seven moves away from Adam Smith to look at the work of David Ricardo. The chapter argues that it is here, rather than in Smith's work, that we can see the birth of what we can today understand, in purely disciplinary terms, as a recognizably “economic” concept of land. Whereas Smith's conception of land was shown in the preceding chapters to emerge from a detailed and nuanced account of the diverse social practices constituting societal subsistence, land in Ricardo's work is defined in a much narrower manner, in terms of its position within a theorized system of production and distribution. Crucially, this involves the rejection of the consideration of a set of

material processes which was so central to Smith's approach. Instead, Ricardo reduces the conception of exchange to a purely monetary one. Here, subsistence remains a consideration, but solely in terms of the importance of agricultural goods in determining the exchangeable value of other goods and labour. Land remains important to Ricardo's theory, but this is primarily through its association with the returns yielded to the landlord in the form of rents. In reducing land to its "factor return" in this way, Ricardo's political economy constitutes an epistemological "break" with Smith's work, setting the tone for subsequent economic theory through to the present day. In this respect, Ricardo's work can be understood as paving the way for the later conflation of land and capital, and its near total relegation from modern economic theory.

The Conclusion first summarizes again the preceding chapters, describing how these have each contributed to developing the central arguments of the thesis, as well as recapitulating my contributions to knowledge. A second section returns to the original problem laid out in this Introduction of the apparent tension seen today between the logics of economy and ecology. In light of the preceding investigation it suggests that, in Smith's work, what we might today understand as "economic" and "ecological" concerns were not in fact understood as neatly separable, but, on the contrary, were intimately interwoven within his science of political economy. Nevertheless, I also note that the specific conclusions Smith reached regarding the beneficent action of markets in effecting the "improvement" of land were crucially influential for the subsequent development of economics. In fact, I suggest that it was largely by taking these conclusions at face value that Ricardo was able to shift political economy towards a much narrower field of analysis, one no longer concerned with the materiality of human existence on the earth. A third section places my claims in greater perspective by contrasting my focus on materiality with two arguments that touch in different ways on the question of *materialism* in relation to the history of economic thought. The first is that of economic historian Tony Wrigley whose approach links shifts in economic thought to the material changes of the Industrial Revolution. Though our approaches are very different, I suggest that my results might help to qualify Wrigley's own interpretation of Smith and Ricardo as both theorists of the pre-industrial "organic" economy. The second is found in John Bellamy Foster's work on *Marx's Ecology* (2000). I suggest that my findings indicate that Smith, in his detailed attention to the materiality of subsistence, is much closer to Marx than is commonly recognized, though drawing more detailed connections remains

as further work to be done. A final section offers some concluding thoughts and indicates paths for future research.



# 1 – The longer trajectory of the development of concepts of land within economic thought

## Introduction

The substantive focus of this thesis is the birth of an economic concept of land. In Chapters Three to Seven, I make a specific argument that the nuanced account of land found in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is definitively not that which forms a key conceptual foundation of subsequent economic thought. The thesis introduction outlined in broad terms the nature of what I am terming a specifically economic concept of land. But making sense of the central argument of the thesis requires some further contextualization of the more specific development it describes. How, then, does my argument fit into understandings of the longer trajectory of conceptions of land within economic thought? What came immediately before “political economy” and how was land understood here? How did the modern (neoclassical) view that land is simply a species of capital emerge? And what is at stake in varying economic conceptions of land?

This chapter seeks to address some of these questions, though the task is not straightforward. As suggested in the thesis introduction, there is, to date, little literature that focusses directly on the concept of land in the history of economic thought. Even the closest existing work, Keith Tribe's *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* (Tribe 1978), is not, in fact, primarily focussed on land as a concept, although it does play an important role. Moreover, Tribe's account does not extend beyond the mid-nineteenth century, and so does not deal with the emergence of neoclassical economics. All histories of economic thought that deal with the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries must, by necessity, deal with the centrality of land to the thought of this period. But the majority of these histories give little coverage to the subsequent shift of economic thought away from land in neoclassicism. This specific development has instead been the focus of a particular Georgist line of critique directed at contemporary economic orthodoxies around land. While these accounts are helpful, however, they are focussed narrowly on developments

around the turn of the twentieth century.

An account of the longer trajectory of the development of concepts of land within economic thought is therefore in need of some reconstruction. Whilst I attempt to account for what I believe to be the most crucial turns in this trajectory, the reconstruction I propose in the following pages does not claim to be exhaustive. The primary function of such a reconstruction is to situate the more specific argument made through the following chapters of this thesis, and, as such, this account is explicitly tailored to this purpose. A more comprehensive narration of this as yet unwritten conceptual history of land in economic thought would require a much more thorough account than there is scope to provide in this chapter. What follows in this chapter, therefore, can be considered a sketch of this longer historical trajectory, outlined with the aim of locating the narrower chronology addressed in Chapters Three to Seven of this thesis. Beyond this, the chapter serves two additional purposes. Firstly, it explores the claim made in the Introduction of the thesis regarding the “disappearance” of land as a concern of modern economic thought. Secondly, in doing so, it substantiates the claim that, following Ricardo, land has been reduced narrowly to its “factor returns”, that is, to the revenues it yields. In exploring these claims, I also introduce the argument that Ricardian political economy marks a “break” in economic thought, an argument which will be developed through the rest of the thesis.

The first section offers a broad survey of the understandings of land in the various discourses that have been cited as forerunners of modern economic thought. Acknowledging that the emergence of political economic understandings of land cannot be accounted for in purely discursive terms, however, the section also touches briefly on the legal developments underpinning this emergence. Section two addresses what is widely understood to be the “classical” view of land in economic thought. It discusses the features of the conception of land as a “factor of production” and the way that this view began to give way to notions of land as capital during the so-called “marginalist revolution” in economics in the 1870s. The final section first looks in more depth at some of the theoretical arguments put forward to refute the “classical” concept of land. In doing so, however, it engages with the question of land’s spatiality. The second half of this section continues on the theme of spatiality, but looks at the treatment of this in Marxist thought, and specifically Marxist economic geography.

## Before political economy

Providing an account of the longer trajectory along which conceptions of land developed within economic thought, requires, in the first place, acknowledging that this development is a discontinuous one. Indeed, central to the argument made by Tribe in his *Land, labour and economic discourse* (1978) is the claim that, prior to the nineteenth century, no such thing as “economic discourse” can be identified. As we will see in the next section, nineteenth century political economy crystallized around the view of land as a “factor of production” closely associated with its “factor return” of rent. However, Tribe’s argument is that, whilst a number of earlier discourses touch on questions relating to land and rent, these are not conceptualized as part of an economy – that is, as part of a theoretical system of production and distribution. Rather, such statements about land and rent have their basis in a diverse set of discourses with disparate concerns.<sup>12</sup> Tribe’s main focus is a broader array of conceptual configurations that define these various discourses, rather than land specifically. Here, therefore, I do not attempt to follow the contours of Tribe’s own investigation. However, what is useful about his account, for the present purposes, is its emphasis on the heterogeneity of the discourses that preceded the birth of political economy in the early nineteenth century. In what follows I provide a snapshot of this heterogeneity by focussing on some of the principal arguments pertaining to land that have been counted amongst the precursors of economic thought.

Some of the more expansive histories of economic thought, for example the classic treatments of the subject by Joseph Schumpeter (1994 [1954]) and Lionel Robbins (1998 [1979]) devote significant space to tracing the precursors (or “anticipations”, to use Robbins’ term) of modern economics. In these accounts, pre-emptions of economic thought are found as far back as Greco-Roman thought (the origins of *oikonomia* were already discussed in the Introduction), with the medieval scholastics and early modern jurists of the natural law tradition playing significant roles. More usually, though, the precursors of modern economic thought are taken to be a set of European discourses from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Following Adam Smith, it has been common to refer to these early modern discourses under the umbrella of “mercantilism”,

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<sup>12</sup> The methodological basis for this claim is explored further in Chapter Two.

though the term is contested.<sup>13</sup> For the present purposes, however, much of what is commonly included here can be ignored on the basis that it pays very little attention to land, being more narrowly focussed on issues of trade, money, and interest. Thomas Mun's *England's treasure by forraign trade*, for example, is one of the most well-known examples of a "balance of trade" argument, suggesting that national wealth consists in the maintenance of a surplus in foreign trade. The work makes only brief reference to land suggesting that a positive balance of trade would have the beneficial effect of raising land values and rents (Mun 1664, ch.5).

Exceptions are found in those authors who focussed in various ways on the implications of the relationship between land and population. William Temple, for example, used the scarcity of land as an index of development, and an explanation for the origin of societies structured around commerce:

I believe the true and original ground of Trade, to be, great multitude of people crowded into small compass of Land, whereby all things necessary to life become dear, and all Men, who have possessions, are induced to Parsimony; but those who have none, are forced to industry and labour, or else to want. (Temple 1693 [1673], 211)<sup>14</sup>

Other authors, such as Robert Coke (see Coke 1671), argued that land and population were the primary sources of national wealth. But this remained a specie-based argument. Whilst depopulation was to be avoided, Coke's discussion of land centred around the recommendation that foreigners should be allowed to purchase English lands, on the basis that this would do much to increase the "treasure" (i.e. money) of England. Schemes for a currency backed by land, most famously associated with John Law (Law 1994 [1703–1704]), could also be included here.

Such arguments have received only fairly scant coverage within histories of economic thought, however. More widely discussed is the work of William Petty. Coke was one of a number of authors making arguments about a perceived condition of decay in contemporary England

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<sup>13</sup> Heckscher's old but still authoritative, two-volume study of *Mercantilism* follows broadly the approach of Smith, defining this as "a phase in the history of economic policy". This consequently renders all thought concerning economic policy within this "phase" *de facto* mercantilist. Roger Backhouse and Keith Tribe are amongst those who have more recently suggested that the term implies a unity that is potentially misleading (Backhouse and Tribe 2018, x). Nevertheless, the it continues to find use within some more recent histories of economic thought (e.g. Vaggi and Groenewegen 2002).

<sup>14</sup> This argument bears similarities with those found in the natural law tradition, discussed below. Hont (2010, 195, n.12) notes, however, that, although apparently similar, Temple's model was not derived from natural law, but rather from the skeptical humanist tradition.

(including of population, and thus wealth in general) (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 246, n.2). Petty's answer to Coke came in the form of his *Political Arithmetic* (Petty 1751 [1676]) which, as the name suggests, claimed to apply arithmetic principles to political questions. At a time when statistical methods were extremely rudimentary, Petty undertook to try to answer contemporary debates around depopulation and economic decline by providing quantitative evidence. As the subtitle to Petty's first essay indicated, this consisted in "a discourse concerning the extent and value of lands, people, buildings", the estimation of which was a task very familiar to him from his previous employment as the chief land surveyor in colonial Ireland. A subsequent essay sought to make various calculations about the inter-relation of population and land, for example, in assessments of the land required to feed the city of London, based on its estimated population and projected growth (Petty 1759 [1683]).

However, historians of economic thought have generally recognized Petty less for his statistical work, and more for his theoretical contributions. Robbins, for example, notes that these are "on quite a different plane as regards modernity and analytical method than his political arithmetic" (Robbins 1998 [1979], 58). Apart from his supposed early statement of the effects of a division of labour, much of this concerns land. Petty's analysis of rent, for example, is seen to contain elements, including the notion of rent as a residual, which foreshadow the Ricardian account of rent over a century later. Perhaps more importantly, Petty is read as making a significant contribution to the history of value theory in his suggestion that,

all things ought to be valued by two natural Denominations, which is Land and Labour; that is, we ought say, a Ship or garment is worth such a measure of Land, with such another measure of Labour; forasmuch as both Ships and Garments were the creatures of Lands and mens Labours thereupon: This being true, we should be glad to finde out a natural Par between Land and Labour, so as we might express the value by either of them alone, as well or better than by both, and reduce one into the other, as easily and certainly, as we reduce Pence into Pounds. (Petty 1689 [1662], 25)

Elsewhere, Petty famously states that, "Labour is the Father and active principle of Wealth, as Lands are the Mother" (Petty 1662).

A number of authors have picked up on Petty's instinct for theoretical economics in his desire to resolve the incommensurability between land and labour (e.g. Robbins 1998 [1979], ch.6). This is a problem which was answered directly by Richard Cantillon. For Cantillon:

Land is the source or the matter from which wealth is derived; labor is the form that produces it, and wealth is itself nothing other than food commodities, and the comforts of life. (Cantillon 2015 [1755], 3)

As Robbins notes (Robbins 1998 [1979], 83), Cantillon's "solution" to Petty's problem, provided in his *Essay on the Nature of Commerce* (Cantillon 2015 [1755]),<sup>15</sup> was to suggest that a commensurability can be achieved by calculating the area of land required to produce the subsistence of a labourer. Cantillon thus provides what is sometimes termed a "land theory of value" (e.g. Brewer 1988), proposing that the cost of any product can be expressed in terms of an area of land – not only that used to produce the requisite raw materials, but also the materials for the subsistence of the labour required to make the item. The equation of individuals with areas of land required for their subsistence is one taken seriously by Cantillon, though he admits that this calculation is not a simple one, and that the subsistence of a peasant requires an area of land orders of magnitude less than that required for a landowner with a taste for luxuries.

Perhaps the most commonly cited discussion of land within the history of economic thought, however, is that associated with the French physiocrats. The physiocratic system is well known for dividing human industry into two categories, agriculture and manufacturing. In this schema, only agriculture was thought to be actually productive, on the basis that it was here that industry harnessed the natural reproductive capacities of the soil. Manufacturing, by contrast, was seen as "sterile" to the extent that such activity could only produce enough for its own subsistence, without generating a surplus that could provide for the subsistence of others. A third social class of landlords was seen as receiving the entire net product of the land in the form of rent. Through landlords' expenditure on food and manufactured goods, they initiated a process of circulation between the agricultural and manufacturing classes famously represented in Francois Quesnay's *Tableau Œconomique* of 1759. This represented circulation as an annual cycle, mirroring the natural rhythm of agricultural production, in which the product of the land was circulated between the two classes, and through which process this product was eventually expended. Like Cantillon, land in physiocracy appears as the ultimate source of all wealth. A corollary of the view that products of land also provided the origin of circulation was the proposition of an *impôt unique* – a

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<sup>15</sup> The work is supposed to have been written in the early 1730s, prior to Cantillon's mysterious death in 1734, and was only published posthumously.

single tax on the value of land, exclusive of improvements.

Cantillon and the physiocrats are remembered more broadly for their contributions to the theorization of an economic system. This is associated with a shift away from older, more empirically focussed arguments on the “strength of a nation”, and towards a more abstract and theoretical conception of a “natural order” in economic life. Here, notions of natural human behaviour aligned with those of a natural political order, the maintenance of which was best exercised with respect to the natural world (Backhouse and Tribe 2018, 18). The idea of the existence of “natural laws”, however, is one with a much longer history. Though not widely discussed in histories of economic thought, several accounts have emphasized the debt of political economy to the natural law tradition in general, and particularly to early modern jurisprudential debates on the origin of property (Hutchison 1988; Hont 2010; Saether 2017). Here, the names of Hugo Grotius, John Locke, and Samuel Pufendorf are particularly significant (for a general overview see Garnsey 2007, ch.6).

These thinkers were interested not only in property, but in the origins, character, and authority of civil government in general. But for the present purposes, the debates around property are of interest for the way they formulated arguments around land. In Grotius and Pufendorf, this takes a particular stadial historical form.<sup>16</sup> Grotius provides an essentially biblical narrative to explain the origins of private property in land, but weaves in the idea that it was the relationship between human societies and their surroundings that had historically determined the form of property. In this account it was ultimately the scarcity of land that was the cause of the breakdown of earlier communal systems of property (Grotius 2012 [1625], II.ii.2). For Grotius, the naturalness of this development, through the use of simple human reason, and according to a pattern of antedeluvian human expansion ordained by God, provided all the justification necessary for private property rights in land. Locke’s famous argument justifying private property in land, by contrast, did not hinge on the same kind of stadial narrative, but rather justified property on the basis of an individual’s entitlement to the products of his own labour. This included, for Locke, labour that

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<sup>16</sup> Garnsey (2007, 139) in fact finds the origins of stadial history much further back in Aristotle’s *Politics*, and particularly the work of his pupil Dicaearchus, who is cited by Grotius. The nature and development of stadial histories in this tradition is explored in greater detail in relation to Adam Smith’s thought in Chapter Three.

was “mixed” with land, an argument that justified the claiming of property over land by an individual in the state of nature.<sup>17</sup>

Amongst the foundational elements of political economy must be counted more material as well as purely theoretical developments, however. Of key importance to the crystallization of political economy is the generalization of capitalist property rights in land. Relatively few accounts of the history of economic thought touch on this subject at all.<sup>18</sup> Keith Tribe’s *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* is notable in its deviation from such standard accounts by placing emphasis on the importance of shifts in the notion of rent associated with enclosure. Tribe emphasizes that feudal rents in fact took a diversity of forms, frequently not involving monetary payments. Most important, rent was not associated with a contractual relation which took land as its object, but rather concerned a relation of personal obligation. Its magnitude was not therefore subject to determination according to broader economic conditions, but reflected prevailing political domination and calculations following from this (Tribe 1978, 33). The point, in relation to economic discourse, is that the personal specificity of the feudal rental relationship precluded the theorization, foundational to political economy, of a system of production in which rents took the singular form of monetized payments for the use of land, whose price was determined by broader conditions of production, and their reflection in market prices.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville was later to use Locke’s argument to justify of lands by colonists in North America (see Connolly 1995, 168). Tocqueville saw the lack of agriculture as a justification for saying that this “vast country was still, properly speaking, an empty continent, a desert land awaiting its inhabitants.” (De Tocqueville 2009 [1835/1840], 536).

<sup>18</sup> Heilbroner (2000), for example, is one of relatively few accounts that give importance to the institution of private property in land as being foundational to the emergence of modern political economy, although this is not discussed in depth. Schumpeter (1994 [1954]) makes a number of allusions to enclosure, but does not discuss it in detail.

<sup>19</sup> The enclosures which secured the dominance of capitalist property in land have long been a favourite episode of Marxist historiography. Marx himself discusses enclosure in *Capital* I.27. A classic twentieth century historical study is that of E.P. Thompson (1982 [1963], see also 1991). In relation to economic thought, Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi 2001 [1944]) stands out for its reading of political economy as an ideological justification for the political project of an attempt to institute a system of self-regulating markets. Polanyi’s account is significant for its argument that land – like labour, and money – constitutes a “fictitious commodity” whose treatment as if it was truly a commodity produced for sale in the market would, unchecked, ultimately result in the destruction of the natural environment and society’s capacity for subsistence (*ibid.*, 76).



## The “classical” view: land as a factor of production

The idea of a “classical” school of political economy is commonly attributed to Marx, who used it to identify his own influences, including Petty, Smith, and Ricardo. Subsequent uses have varied significantly, however. Keynes, for example, claimed to be influenced by Marx’s original usage of the term to refer to Ricardo and his predecessors, but extended its horizon substantially to encompass “those... who adopted and perfected the theory of the Ricardian economics, including (for example) J. S. Mill, Marshall, Edgeworth and Prof. Pigou” (Keynes 2018 [1936], 3, n.1). Schumpeter, by contrast, dated classicism more narrowly between ca. 1790 and ca. 1870, a chronological range significant for its exclusion of Smith. More fundamentally, definitions of classicism show substantial variation. Keynes’ account, following the preoccupations of his *General Theory* turns on what he identifies as “classical” theories of wages and employment.<sup>20</sup> Sraffa instead defined the classical school in terms of those writers whose work can be read in terms of a theorization of a surplus in a process of production which is characterized by a division of labour (see Roncaglia 2009, 39). Robbins, meanwhile, saw classicism as a school which had accepted the “perspective” of Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, or in other words, “an analysis of the machinery of productive organization and a discussion of the nature of growth and the causes or objectives of growth” (Robbins 1998 [1979], 167). Still others have played down the idea of a break between modern and classical economics. Veblen, for example, talked of neoclassicism and Austrian economics in the same breath as “modernized classical views”, which he opposed instead to “historical and Marxist schools” (1900, 261).

Not only does the content of the “classical” canon vary, therefore, but the very basis on which such a canon might be constructed varies significantly between uses. In spite of these problems, the term continues to find use within histories of economic thought. Vaggi and Groenewegen, for example, insist on the usefulness of a distinction between classical economics and “modern approaches” (2001, xi), finding the turning point in the figure of J.S. Mill. (although Marx here

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<sup>20</sup> Schumpeter suggested that Keynes’ usage was broad enough to encompass almost the entirety of pre-Keynesian economics (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 380).

remains a “classical” author); Roncaglia meanwhile, contra Schumpeter, finds a “golden age” of classicism in the period between Smith and Ricardo, with the school surviving until the marginal revolution of the 1870s (Roncaglia 2005). This thesis as a whole instead follows the approach of Keith Tribe in finding reasons for considerable scepticism towards the label of “classical political economy”, a position that Tribe has restated recently in a work co-authored with Roger Backhouse in which the authors state:

Not only is “classical political economy” a retrospective classification that contemporaries would not have recognized, it also significantly blurs important ideas and principles. We prefer to simply ignore the usage. (2018, x)

Nevertheless, in reference to land, the term remains at least somewhat useful in identifying key strands of commentary on the trajectory of understandings of land within economic thought. This is especially so because many authors seem to ascribe a particular significance to land within “classical” thought. Indeed, yet further definitions have described questions around land as foundational for classical economics. An example of this view was put forward in an article by Paul Samuelson, who suggested that Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, J.S. Mill, and (with some qualification) Marx can be understood as putting forward an essentially unified “classical canonical model of political economy” (Samuelson, 1978). Whilst historians of economic thought had debated the divergences between members of this group of authors, he suggested, any differences were in fact largely semantic, or the result of straightforward misunderstanding (*ibid.*, 1430). Instead, via a mathematical reconstruction he claimed to show that all in fact put forward the same model in which land scarcity would eventually lead to declining profits.<sup>21</sup> Mark Blaug follows in a related vein, but with a different inflection, suggesting that the problematic of classicism is defined by “a contrast between nonaugmentable land and augmentable labour” (Blaug 1997 [1968], 278).

The question of land scarcity in relation to population is perhaps most famously (indeed notoriously) associated with Thomas Robert Malthus, the Anglican cleric, and later Professor of

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<sup>21</sup> The qualification in relation to Marx was that he had “soft-pedalled” the questions of land and resource scarcity, making these less explicit concerns than the other authors. According to Samuelson, however, these could straightforwardly be read back into Marx’s work in order to reveal the continuity of his thinking with the rest of this group. The dubious historiographical merit of the kind of “rational reconstruction” undertaken here by Samuelson is addressed in greater detail in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, the comments remain indicative of dominant understandings of classicism in economics amongst economists and historians of economic thought.

Political Economy and History at the East India College whose *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798, argued that human reproduction would push levels of population beyond the capacity of the land to provide subsistence for these individuals. In an also famous line of reasoning, he suggests,

Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second. By that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. (2010 [1798], 99).

Malthus' infamy derived from the fatalism with which he suggested that no increase in societal wealth could better the condition of the labouring poor, who were therefore liable to be subject to the "positive" checks on population that came in the form of pauperism and infant mortality. Whilst Malthus did subsequently publish his own *Principles of Political Economy* in 1820, historians of economic thought have focussed principally on the *Essay*, interpreting its argument on the limitations of the application of additional labour to land in agriculture as an important statement of the doctrine of diminishing returns (e.g. Robbins 1998 [1979], 167).

Whether or not authors see the question of land and its scarcity as actually definitive of classical economics, however, there nevertheless seems to be a greater consensus that there exists a distinctly "classical" concept of land. This consists in the theorization of land as a discrete "factor of production", clearly distinguishable from labour and capital. In this view, classicism rests on a three-factor model in which land, labour, and capital form the constituent elements of the productive process. Each has its own distinctive factor reward, in the form of rent, wages, and profits, which are associated with the three social classes whose subsistence is provided by each of these forms of income: respectively, landlords, labourers, and capitalists. As the definitions of Samuelson and Blaug suggest, a key feature of land, and one that distinguishes it from capital and labour, is its non-reproducibility. The assumption is that a given territory contains only a finite quantity of land, and its scarcity therefore becomes a function of the population of that territory. Rent, in turn, becomes a function of this scarcity.

The most famous exposition of this view is undoubtedly that of David Ricardo, whose *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* came to be seen as the classic exposition of what has become known

as the “Ricardian” doctrine of rent, in spite of the fact that Ricardo was neither the only nor the first to put forward this theory.<sup>22</sup> Ricardo’s understanding of land is discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis. However, for the present purposes, it is important to note that Ricardo’s work is accorded a central place within accounts of land in “classical” political economy. A central argument of Ricardo’s *Principles* was that increasing population in an absence of international competition would produce a dynamic in which the profits of capital would be progressively eroded by rising rents, resulting in a “stationary state” in which no further growth of capital would be possible. The key theoretical intervention associated with Ricardo’s work is the conception of the rent of land as a differential. In this view, rent could exist in the absence of absolute scarcity as a result of differences in the advantages of location and fertility provided by different pieces of land. The magnitude of this rent, however, is understood to be determined by the productivity of the least favourable land taken into cultivation. It was reasoned that this least favourable land would not generate a rent, since the price fetched for the product of this land would be sufficient only to cover the necessary costs of production – wages and the normal profits of capital. Rents, however, would be generated on superior lands which amounted to the discrepancy in productivity, above the cost of production. In Ricardo’s exposition, this was supported by the idea that land could be imagined to exist in discrete grades of quality (1, 2, 3 etc...) to which “doses” of labour and capital could be applied.<sup>23</sup>

The work of American political economist Henry George has in general been paid far less attention by historians of economic thought.<sup>24</sup> But his *Progress and Poverty*, first published in 1879, remains

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<sup>22</sup> It is commonly accepted that Malthus and others had put forward similar theories in a set of papers on the question of agricultural protection in 1815 (e.g. Backhouse and Tribe 2018, ch.5). There is, however, an alternative, older derivation: William Stanley Jevons finds the first “discovery” of the theory of rent in a pamphlet of James Anderson in 1777 (Jevons 2013 [1871], 210).

<sup>23</sup> The vocabulary of “doses” is not actually attributable to Ricardo, but rather to his friend and supporter James Mill (see Jevons 2013 [1871], 213), but is a term that has often justifiably been used to describe Ricardo’s approach, which, like his discrete “grades” of land, also reasons in terms of discrete units of capital (e.g. Blaug 2000, 271).

<sup>24</sup> This is partly attributable to the fact that, methodologically at least, George has often been seen as being fairly conservative. Schumpeter, for example, notes the competence of George’s grasp of “scientific economics” up to and including J.S. Mill, but suggested that he “failed to understand” contemporary developments in the discipline (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 865). This reputation is perhaps also due, however, to George’s position in a tradition of nineteenth century popular writers on political economy whose contemporary fame is often read as being associated with derivative content. Backhouse and Tribe dispute the validity of this dismissive reading, however. In reference to methodology, they challenge the accusation of conservatism, noting the resonance of George’s arguments with contemporary marginalist theory (Backhouse and Tribe 2018, 133).

significant as one of the last – and certainly the most widely read – economic texts in which land, conceived as a factor of production, is made a central focus. Here George addressed the question of poverty, but contra the fatalism of Malthus and other early nineteenth century English political economists, he approached this from a socialist perspective, arguing that things could and should be done to alleviate the injustice of wealth inequality. Indeed, the central theoretical observation was one that he self-consciously saw as a linking of “the truth perceived by the school of Smith and Ricardo to the truth perceived by the school of Proudhon and Lasalle [sic]” (George 2009 [1879], xi).<sup>25</sup> This gave pride of place to land, emphasizing the tension between what the political economists had recognized as the social determination of land values, and the regime of private ownership which allowed individuals to appropriate gains in these values brought about by an advancing society. George suggested that this contradiction was the basis of persistent poverty in rich countries, in spite of their huge gains in societal wealth. Indeed, not only did George see the institution of property in land as determining the persistence of poverty, its abolition would, he suggested, provide a panacea for all kinds of societal ills, from the cycle of boom and bust that had characterized capitalist production, to deficiencies in the allocation and improvement of land itself. Nevertheless, he rejected radical proposals for the nationalization of land, instead popularizing the more reformist idea of a “single tax” on land, to replace all other forms of taxation.<sup>26</sup>

George’s work has continued to inspire a heterodox tradition of land-focussed economics (see the work of Gaffney, e.g. Gaffney 1965, 2009; Gaffney and Harrison 1994; see also Tideman 1994; and for a recent reinvigoration of Georgist ideas Ryan-Collins et al. 2017). However, whilst the idea of land value taxation (though not of a single tax) has retained support from subsequent mainstream economists (Blaug 2000, 284), as an object of theoretical and substantive concern, land’s prominence within mainstream economics has declined dramatically. Given the

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Blaug agreed at least on the continuity with Ricardo, suggesting that George’s theory should be read as following the obvious conclusions of Ricardo’s view that rent represented a form of “unearned income” – conclusions that had first been made explicit by the Mills (Blaug 2000, pp. 272–3).

<sup>26</sup> Blaug (2000, 278) suggests that George was hesitant about embracing the terminology of the “single tax”, which had caught on as a description of his programme. It is worth noting also that support for taxes on ground rent had long been common amongst political economists, notably J.S. Mill who saw the taxation of rents as a logical conclusion of Ricardo’s theory. Even the idea of a “single tax” was not new when George suggested it, having a historical precedent – albeit one with very different political aims – in the Physiocrats’ proposal of an *impôt unique*, a connection that George himself acknowledged, though claiming that he had no prior knowledge of Quesnay’s work when he was constructing his own theory (George 2009 [1879], 381).

prominence of land within most nineteenth century economics, its almost total disappearance within dominant strands of economics in the twentieth century is striking. Georgists in particular have lamented the profusion of modern economics textbooks in which land does not even appear in the index (e.g. Ryan-Collins et al. 2017, 2). Broadly two explanations have been offered for this phenomenon.

More recent Georgist literature, following Gaffney and Harrison, (1994) has argued that the decline of concern for land within mainstream economic thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in fact part of a deliberate attempt by wealthy business and financial interests in the United States to counter the rising popularity of Georgism as a political movement in the 1890s. Though relatively little-known today, George's influence in his day was significant, not only in the United States, but also internationally. In fact, his extensive international speaking engagements (Pullen 2014) helped to popularize the ideas of *Progress and Poverty*, and contributed to the establishment of Georgist movements in a number of countries.<sup>27</sup> Gaffney suggests that George's political involvement and its popular support were seen as a very real danger by contemporary business and financial elites in the United States, who therefore sought to promote economic theories which refuted George by downplaying the importance of land. In this account, backing provided to John Bates Clark in the 1890s contributed to establishing a new "neoclassical" economics in which land was no longer recognized as a distinct factor of production. This intervention was crucial, these authors argue, since it resulted in the relegation of land, both theoretically and as a substantive concern, from a central facet of economic thought to a mere fringe concern within the discipline (Gaffney 1994, 40). In seeing land thus as *the* key fault-line within the history of economic thought, Georgists are amongst the most insistent on the coherence of the notion of a "classical" school of political economy, and its essential association with a conception of land as a "factor of production".

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<sup>27</sup> This was true not least in Britain. Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (2010) have argued that at the end of the nineteenth century, George's liberal approach constituted a powerful and influential intervention to the long-standing "land question" in Britain. This gained significant traction, and indeed a serious – and almost successful – attempt to implement a single tax in Britain came under the government of Lloyd George on the eve of the first world war in 1913. This campaign did not survive the war, and subsequent attempts to revive it in the earlier twentieth century proved politically unviable.

Despite, or perhaps because of his popular fame, the direct refutations of Clark and other contemporaries aside, George was largely ignored by subsequent economists.<sup>28</sup> Outside Georgist commentary, it is fair to say that the decline of interest in land in economics has not received significant attention as a concern in and of itself. Dominant narratives within the history of economics, however, do provide their own explanation for this shift, pointing to more narrowly theoretical developments. Here the chronological emphasis shifts slightly with the first authors of the “marginalist revolution” of the 1870s becoming the main focus. Many commentators have noted affinities between this new form of marginal analysis and the “Ricardian” doctrine of rent, with its focus on lands at the margin of cultivation. Opinions differ, however, on the extent to which the marginalism of the 1870s is to be read in continuity with earlier political economy. Schumpeter (1994 [1954], 674, n.75), for example, denies modern marginal productivity theory should be read straightforwardly as an extrapolation of what he terms Ricardo’s “marginal cost” theory, though he concedes that later theorists *may* have arrived at the former by a critical appraisal of Ricardo’s theory. Mark Blaug (1997 [1968], 78), by contrast, is much more convinced of the continuity of Ricardo’s version of marginalism, and that of subsequent marginalists, insisting that the Ricardian theory of differential rent “is formally identical with the marginal productivity theory”.

Georgist accounts have emphasized that this shift involved reduction of economic theory to a two-factor (labour and capital) form of analysis. As Fred Folvary notes,

The marginal revolution in economic theory not only introduced the concept of marginal utility but also homogenized land and capital goods to the point where the important distinction between them was blurred (Folvary 1994, 141)

In Blaug’s view, however, following logical conclusions of the Ricardian exposition of rent theory, this development appears as entirely natural, even inevitable. According to this account, John Stuart Mill was the first to recognize the implication from Ricardo’s theory that rent attracted by land in one form of use constituted a cost that must be paid when this land is used for another purpose (Blaug 1997 [1968], 81). Following Mill, William Stanley Jevons subsequently sought to

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<sup>28</sup> Conspiratorial forces aside, Blaug (2000, 282) suggests that in the case of Alfred Marshall – whose *Principles of economics*, published in 1891, was highly influential for subsequent generations of students in economics – a jealous guarding of professionalism within the discipline was the primary reason for his failure to engage with George’s work, George being an autodidact, and an outsider to the contemporary economics establishment.

demonstrate that capital was less different to land than had previously been thought, to the extent that any existing investment of capital was fixed in the short term, and would therefore (similarly to land) attract what he termed a “quasi-rent” (Jevons 2013 [1871], 286). Amongst the first generation marginalists, however, it is perhaps Léon Walras who expressed most explicitly the view that land could be understood as a species of capital:

[L]and laid out as parks and pleasure grounds, both public and private; forest lands; agricultural land growing fruit, vegetables, cereals, fodder and other foodstuffs for man and beast; the ground beneath homes, public buildings, offices, factories, workshops or stores; land used for roads, highways, public squares, canals, railways, and all means of communication. All this land is truly capital. (Walras 2003, 214)

Nevertheless, it was not the case that land simply or immediately disappeared from economic thought. Even Walras, whilst clearly proposing the view that land can be understood as species of capital, was careful at other points in his work to distinguish between land, as a form of capital, and “capital goods proper”. This distinction was made on the basis that the latter is “*artificial or produced* capital and is perishable”, whilst the former is not (*ibid.*, 217, italics in original). Jevons also still regarded land as one of the key “elements” of the “science of political economy” (Jevons 2013 [1871], 1). What seems to have changed, however, is the emphasis on land’s scarcity. Of the late nineteenth century marginalists, Alfred Marshall – though a generation after Jevons, Walras, and Carl Menger – was perhaps the only major figure to insist on a three-factor model based around land scarcity, albeit simultaneously recognizing a continuum of rents and quasi-rents that applied also to capital goods. For the others, land’s scarcity became merely one part (and not an especially interesting one) of a much more general problem of scarcity, in which the availability of productive factors precedes, and is therefore exogenous to, economic analysis itself. Jevons’ formulation is indicative when he states that the “problem of economics” can be posed thus:

Given, a certain population, with various needs and powers of production, in possession of certain lands and other sources of material: required, the mode of employing their labour which will maximise the utility of the produce. (Jevons 2013 [1871], 267)

Here land, like population, is a “given”, the task of economic analysis being the maximization of utility based on these conditions.

Land in subsequent mainstream neoclassical analysis has ceased to be an object of special theoretical or substantive significance. Indeed, whilst land-related issues are still dealt with by



economists, this work is conducted almost exclusively within specific sub-disciplines. Gaffney has been particularly critical of this relegation of land to specialist fields such as land, urban, environmental, or resource economics, a process he refers to as “colonization” (Gaffney 1994, 40). For Gaffney, this is a strategy for keeping “critical tendencies” at a safe distance from the core discipline, where neoclassical theoretical assumptions are preserved. More recent developments have seen greater integration of the various forms of land economics, and in particular new methods for understanding environmental issues relating to land (see Duke and Wu 2014). Whether or not we accept Gaffney’s claims that this divide is functional in preventing connections being drawn between the concerns of land economists and issues such as unemployment and inflation, however, it is nevertheless the case that, to date, these subfields have had little discernible impact on the mainstream of neoclassical economic analysis.

It is beyond the scope of the present thesis to adjudicate between the rival claims regarding the reasons for the decline of interest in land within economics between Georgist and more mainstream accounts of the history of economic thought. The aim of the present chapter is not to account for *why* this decline occurred, but rather to get a sense of how, in theoretical terms, understandings of land shifted. In the following section, I start by engaging in more detail with the neoclassical theoretical arguments Clark mobilized against George. But to conclude this section, it is worth returning once more to Blaug’s more narrowly theoretical commentary, which summarizes the shift away from the “classical” account of land in the following terms:

The classical authors treated land as a ‘free gift of nature’, a special factor of production distinct from man-made means of production and reproducible human labour. But in reality, natural resources do not differ from the general run of capital goods in that they do require initial development and subsequent maintenance charges. If by ‘land’ we mean resources given by nature and available for use without cost, a very large part of the territorial resources of a society are not ‘land’ at all: fields that have been drained, cleared, and manured are as much a part of the product of past labour as are machines. If ‘land’ is a factor of production, it must be said to consist of the heritage of equipment and improvements of the past given to the present generation as free goods. The classical predisposition to regard land as not producible is largely the result of thinking in physical rather than economic terms. (Blaug 1997 [1968], 81)

There are a number of things we might disagree with here. As we will see in Chapter Two, this kind of commentary, in suggesting that the more recent view constitutes “reality”, implies a positivistic notion of economics as a science, one which suggests that the development of

economic thought is characterized by the progressive accrual of positive truths.<sup>29</sup> This is a view, I will suggest, that has been characteristic of a lot of work in the history of economic thought. Nevertheless, the quote usefully introduces a line of reasoning concerning the “produced” nature of land’s economic value that, as we will see in the next section, was central to Clark’s arguments against George. However, what is particularly useful about Blaug’s comments, for the present purposes, is that he posits a distinction between thinking in “physical” and “economic” terms about land. This is a distinction that is crucial to the claims of this thesis as a whole. In making this assertion, Blaug reinforces the idea that modern economics has deemed a consideration of land in its physicality not only unnecessary, but indeed actively misguided. However, if by “physicality” Blaug means to refer to land’s materiality, then, as we will see in the next section, this is a claim that might require some qualification.

## **Neoclassicism and the loss of spatiality**

As I suggested in the Introduction of the thesis, to conceive of land in physical terms is to think in terms of its existence as matter, or perhaps as a set of material components. Yet I suggest that this is not strictly what is at stake in the distinction between the “classical” and modern views of land in economic thought. Blaug’s physical/economic distinction is better understood by appeal to the category of space. Distinctive of the neoclassical conception of land is the loss of the implicit spatiality that instead characterized classical understandings of land. What is actually at stake, then, is a distinction between spatial and a-spatial conceptions of land.

In this context, it is instructive to look in more detail at the arguments made by Clark. Of the first generation marginalists, Jevons and Menger had already nullified the problem of land’s scarcity in its entirety by simply ignoring it. As we saw above, Walras’ position on land was more ambiguous. It was Clark, however, who, in seeking a more definitive settlement of the relationship between

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<sup>29</sup> The label positivist is one that Blaug himself would surely have rejected. In fact, Blaug’s views on the philosophy of science and methodology of history of economic thought shifted through his career, as we will see in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, as I will argue there, in spite of a general rejection of positivistic notions of science by historians of economic thought, there has nevertheless been a tendency to retain key facets of positivism within dominant methodologies in the field.

land and capital, dealt with the question of land's scarcity in the greatest detail. As suggested above, the core of his approach was to argue that land should be understood as a form of capital. But Clark's notion of capital was itself highly distinctive. A clear exposition of this is given in an article of 1888, entitled "Capital and its Earnings", where he opposed the idea that capital should be regarded as consisting in any particular kinds of goods. Instead Clark suggested that "pure capital" should be understood as a kind of "permanent fund" that "passes through and endless series of outward forms" (Clark 1888, 94), of which land was merely a possible one<sup>30</sup>. Clark saw it as necessary, however, to give a thorough refutation of the idea that ownership of land constituted a monopolization of societal wealth. His approach was to distinguish between the various kinds of utility that land provided, suggesting that the term "rent", as commonly used to refer to the payment made by a tenant to a landlord, failed to convey that this single payment for the use of land should in fact be understood as comprising a set of distinct values relating to the various specific forms of utility provided by land. Opposing the Ricardian notion that land was a payment for the "original and indestructible" powers of the soil, Clark argued that, in fact, the only aspect of land's utility that could truly be said to be original and indestructible was its physical solidity, which was, in any case, a utility so abundant in the world that it could not ever be chargeable (*ibid.* 114).

Whereas Ricardo had used the "original and indestructible" label to refer to the fertility of the soil, Clark's view of land's productive capacities was quite different. He suggested that in modern societies land's "natural fertility" (that which could be subject to a monopoly) played a vanishingly small part in the actual productivity of land. Instead the importance of long-term improvements to the land, and of the short-term capital inputs required for agricultural production meant that a large part of land's fertility was not at all "natural", but was rather produced by human industry. Indeed, for Clark, it was even possible to separate conceptually the soil from the land itself:

The loam is, in a certain way, distinct from the land on which it lies, and is to be regarded rather as a food-creating tool, that wears itself out in imparting to a product the chemical elements that it contains... After the original supply [of the fertility of this loam] has been reduced, the process of soil manufacture becomes a necessary part of agriculture,

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<sup>30</sup> Clark's argument on the immortality of capital, conceived as distinct from the physicality of worldly things, is striking: "The bodily tissue of capital lives by destruction and replacement; the utility that is the vital essence of it is, in successful industry, perpetual" (1888, 98). Land, he suggests, is simply one particular form in which a capital can remain indefinitely (*ibid.*, 95).

and the food-creating qualities of surface loam, like any other product of industry, are worth what they cost. (*ibid.*, 116)

Another kind of utility provided by land was that of place. Clark emphasizes that, to a large extent, this too was not an inherent or natural facet of land, but was itself reproducible by human labour. In an age when technological developments – and above all the railway – had showed their ability to “annihilate distance” (*ibid.*, 115), access to markets was restricted less by any natural attribute of land, and more by the state of infrastructural investment. There was, Clark conceded, a residuum of “place utility” based on “literal proximity” that could not be reproduced. This could therefore be said to give to land “the only monopoly value that resides in it” (*ibid.*, 116), but could ultimately account only for a small amount of the value of the rent payment.

Clark’s account is striking on a number of levels.<sup>31</sup> But it is the sense of spatiality that is of particular of interest here. In spite of his concession that there exists a residual element of “limited monopoly” (*ibid.*, 116) of place utility involved in private land ownership, the impetus of the argument is clearly to minimize the significance of this fact, moving us away from a conception of land as a portion of an ultimately fixed territorial space. Instead, land is to be conceived overwhelmingly in terms of forms of utility that are not naturally (or indeed societally) given but are made by human labour; land, that is to say, should be thought of as something “manufactured” (*ibid.*, 136). In this sense, land is seen to have a “cost of production”, and one that ultimately determines the returns due to it. Any problems of limited space, Clark assures the reader, will in fact be dealt with by the tendencies towards the improvement in the productive powers of land, and towards an efficient allocation of land’s various uses, which are inherent to the forces of the market. The extension of agriculture into new lands, which was at the heart of Ricardo’s argument, thus gives way to an emphasis on the intensification of production on lands already in production; accordingly, the “natural” component of land’s value simultaneously gives way to a focus on values imparted by human labour and capital (*ibid.*, 129 n.1).

The point here is not to provide a critical assessment of Clark’s claims, though several important sleights of hand could be noted within these arguments. Given the influential nature of Clark’s

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<sup>31</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to explore further the ecological content of Clark’s ideas in greater detail, but this would certainly repay further investigation.

concept of capital on the development of neoclassical economics, the point here is instead to highlight the extent to which it moves away from the “classical” concept of land as a distinct factor of production, predicated on the understanding of land as a spatial monopoly.

It has often been noted that what I have discussed as the “classical” (i.e. Ricardian) theory of rent contains, at least implicitly, a sense of land’s spatiality. This is true in two senses. Firstly, in the sense that the position of land is something that is thought to affect its value – proximity to settlements or infrastructure, for example, might confer advantages that increase the rental value of a plot of land. Secondly, land is conceived as spatial to the extent that a plot of land is understood – to borrow terminology from Blaug – in areal terms as pure “economic space”, the supply of which within a given territory is “highly inelastic”, if not absolutely fixed (Blaug 2000, 274). These words are used to summarize the “classical” assumptions about land maintained by Alfred Marshall, but Marshall’s own words are instructive:

When we have inquired what it is that marks off land from those material things which we regard as products of the land, we shall find that the fundamental attribute of land is its extension. The right to use a piece of land gives command over a certain space – a certain part of the earth's surface. The area of the earth is fixed: the geometric relations in which any particular part of it stands to other parts are fixed. Man has no control over them; they are wholly unaffected by demand; they have no cost of production, there is no supply price at which they can be produced.

The use of a certain area of the earth's surface is a primary condition of anything that man can do; it gives him room for his own actions, with the enjoyment of the heat and the light, the air and the rain which nature assigns to that area; and it determines his distance from, and in a great measure his relations to, other things and other persons. We shall find that it is this property of “land” which, though as yet insufficient prominence has been given to it, is the ultimate cause of the distinction which all writers on economics are compelled to make between land and other things. It is the foundation of much that is most interesting and most difficult in economic science. (Marshall 2013 [1890], pp. 120–1)

As suggested above, however, Marshall was unusual amongst the neoclassical economists in maintaining an emphasis on land’s scarcity, and thereby the second sense in which land’s spatiality was conceived. Of the first generation marginalists, Jevons and Menger at least had already nullified the problem of land’s scarcity in its entirety by simply ignoring it. As we saw above, Walras’ position on land was more ambiguous.

Clark’s arguments are designed specifically to play down the importance of land’s spatiality. In his

account, the second of our senses of space – that of land as an area of a limited economic space – disappears. The first – that of positionality – remains, but taken in isolation it reduces any sense of land’s spatiality to the linear measure of its distance from other things. Moreover, any consideration of land’s positionality is superfluous to neoclassical analysis, the value of rent being the only aspect of land that holds any analytical interest. Clark’s argument in fact points to the notion that the term “rent” is, in a strict sense, a misnomer, the payment for the use of land – its “factor return” – being governed almost entirely, he suggests, by the principle of profit rather than that of rent proper.<sup>32</sup> He prefers the term “market rent” to specify the actual payment received for the use of land, as opposed to the theoretical principle governing the value of that payment. As a result of this shift in analytical perspective, land is in effect reduced purely to its factor returns.

The poverty of neoclassical conceptions of space has been noted by others. The influential economic geographer Doreen Massey, in an article published in 1973, referred to neoclassical economic theory as fundamentally “a-spatial” (Massey 1973, 33). Massey’s particular target in this article was neoclassical location theory, in the traditions of Alfred Weber and Harold Hotelling, and the later behaviouralist tradition. Her critique, though, addressed neoclassical economics as a whole, suggesting that “the assumption of much theoretical economics that life takes place on the head of a pin should be regarded as one of its less convincing abstractions” (*ibid.*, 36). She argued that the basic premises of the various strands of location theory that had emerged within neoclassicism were misguided to the extent that they all involved an attempt to retro-fit a form of spatial analysis onto theoretical foundations which in themselves were void of any conception of space. The result, she suggested, was that such location theory often involved a highly abstracted notion of space in which “distance is the only quality of space considered as locationally significant” (*ibid.*, 33).

Marxist economic geographers such as Massey, David Harvey, and Neil Smith have continued to draw, via Marx, on a “classical” account of land and rent.<sup>33</sup> Here, the most sustained theoretical

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<sup>32</sup> Profit being defined as a return proportional to the capital invested, rent being defined as a residual of the value of the product after subtracting the costs of production (implying a monopoly position on the part of the landowner).

<sup>33</sup> Prior to Harvey’s turn to Marx in the early 1970s, his earlier work had paid attention to non-Marxist economic accounts of land and location, including the classic von Thünen model, which in itself draws on classical rent theory, as well as later spatial equilibrium and behavioural models (see David W. Harvey 1966).

interest in rent and its spatiality came in the 1970s and early 1980s. Harvey's seminal *Social Justice and the City* (2009 [1973]), for example, drew extensively on a Marxian-influenced conception of rent, noting the ability of various forms of rents to shape urban land uses (see also Harvey and Chatterjee 1974). *Capital and Land*, co-authored by Massey and Alejandrina Catalano (1978) attempted to put contemporary Marxist debates around the extreme land price volatility in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s on a more sure footing with an empirical analysis of the contemporary relation between land and capital, which was backed up by a detailed theoretical account of Marxian rent and its relation to locational organization. Perhaps the fullest account of rent, however, was given in Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* (2018 [1982]), a work which was, in turn, influential for Neil Smith's subsequent *Uneven Development* (2008 [1984]).

Whilst rent continues to be a used theoretical tool within urban studies, it is striking that these thinkers have largely moved away from discussions of land and rent.<sup>34</sup> Today, Massey is perhaps best remembered for her subsequent post-Marxist accounts of *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1984), and *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994, see also 2005), in which notions of "geometries of power" and "space-time" have supplanted the earlier concern for the spatial aspects of rent. Similarly, Harvey, whilst retaining a much closer adherence to the conceptual language of Marxism has moved onto broader issues of theory, class politics, and environmental justice. In the case of these thinkers however, the partial decline of interest in rent has not resulted in a sustained engagement with land beyond the classical conception. Conceptually, therefore, land remains largely tied to a consideration of economic values.

Of the works cited above, Massey and Catalano's book provides perhaps the broadest account of land, delving into the history of land as property, albeit in the limited geographical context of the United Kingdom. But the theoretical part of the work falls back to an understanding of land narrowly in terms of rent. A partial exception to this limited engagement with land as a concept in its own right is found in the work of Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). In *The Production of Space* (*La Production de l'Espace*) (1991 [1974]), Lefebvre's comments on land are not extensive,

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<sup>34</sup> Neil Smith is a partial exception (see, for example 1996). Some have noted a partial rejection of the universalism of rent theory within the field of urban studies as a whole, in favour of more particularist approaches (see Haila 1990; Jäger 2010).

yet the understanding of land these reveal is a broad one. Lefebvre discusses land variously in terms of its historicity as property, its existence as a facet of the natural world, as political economic *concept*, and, of course, in terms of space. The spatiality of land here is not conceived in flatly two dimensional terms, however, but as volume, encompassing subterranean resources, and the space above land which is frequently produced in the process of urbanization.

Lefebvre here does briefly mention rent, but mainly in order to bemoan its frequent omission from Marxist analysis.<sup>35</sup> Like others, Lefebvre noted that land is neglected within Marx's thought, but his comments in this respect are illuminating. These suggest that Marx's move from talking of *relations* of production to *modes* of production represented a lacuna in his thought: "What of the part played by the *land*, as concept and as reality", asks Lefebvre (*ibid.*, 323). The argument is that Marx's attempt to analyse capitalism in terms of a binary (and dialectical) opposition of capital and labour, bourgeoisie and proletariat "presupposes the disappearance from the picture of a *third* cluster of factors: namely the land, the landowning class, ground rent, and agriculture as such" (*ibid.*, 324). Lefebvre notes that land re-appeared at the very end of *Capital* (III.ii), but suggests that this is one of the major threads left under-developed at Marx's death. It is this thread Lefebvre sees as all the more urgently in need of further investigation in light of subsequent developments which have brought ever further facets of the natural and social world under the sway of capitalism.

Lefebvre's comments are revealing to the extent that they highlight a tension around land within Marxist theory. Marx's account of production recognizes the role of land, but his account of distribution deviates from the classical (i.e. Ricardian) analysis by not recognizing landlords as a social class in their own right, instead conflating this group with capitalists. Lefebvre notes that this move was not without its grounds in the real conditions of Marx's day or subsequently. Indeed, it was precisely this assumption that Massey and Catalano's book sought to validate empirically nearly a century after Marx's death, concluding that, in contemporary Britain, landlords were indeed not a identifiable "social force" with their own distinct interests. Whereas, in the Ricardian system, the analysis of production was inextricably tied to the distributional analysis, the political emphasis on distributional questions within Marxism therefore tends to push the analysis

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<sup>35</sup> A more detailed discussion of ground rent from a theoretical perspective is conducted by Lefebvre in an earlier paper (Lefebvre 2016 [1956]).



in a direction which ignores the significance of land. Simultaneously, Lefebvre's comments suggest that, left undeveloped, Marx's largely classical account of land rent fails to capture the ever-deepening intertwining of capitalism with the fabric of the earth, much of which is captured, for Lefebvre, within the analysis of "space".

## Conclusions

The discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that informed the birth of political economy around the turn of the nineteenth century were characterized by a diversity of conceptions of land, a diversity which undoubtedly arose from the variety of political and practical contexts to which these spoke. Land was seen variously as a key element of national wealth, the origin of exchangeable value, the foundation of legal systems, and the source of subsistence for individuals. The "classical" view of land that emerged in the nineteenth century retained certain elements of these views, but jettisoned others, crystallizing around a more formalized set of themes. Gone, for example, were notions of land as the source of wealth and exchangeable value. Gone too, for the most part, was any consideration of the political significance of property in land. What was certainly retained, and indeed given new significance was the land-population nexus, and the notion that land was a monopoly over a fundamentally limited territorial space. In this context, the analysis of rents came to the fore.

The marginalist revolution, however, marked a watershed in the way land was understood as a concept within economic thought. Jevons, Menger, and Walras all sought to downplay the economic significance of land and its scarcity. In their own ways, each aligned land, rhetorically or more theoretically, with the concept of capital. Of these, none gave detailed consideration to land, however, and the arguments that had been commonly made for its specificity as a factor of production. It is in Clark's work that we can see the most detailed and sustained attempt at a refutation of the classical conception of land, involving a novel and painstaking analysis of the origins of the various forms of utility conferred by land. If the classical view narrowed land to a "factor of production", then the neoclassical view stripped away everything but land's "factor return", a stream of revenue commonly termed "rent", but conceived now as a form of profit.

With this shift, land no longer had any specificity in economic theory, being instead seen as something infinitely fungible with any other form of “productive resource”, or capital.

For the purposes of the thesis arguments as a whole, however, what is most important about the history outlined here is that the trajectory of the development of understandings of land in economic thought since the turn of the nineteenth century has followed the development of a debate about the nature of land’s “factor return”. Specifically, should the returns that land yields to its owner be understood, as in the “classical” view, as a rent, derived from a monopoly over a limited and non-reproducible societal resource. Or should the value of these returns instead be understood as the product of forms of utility that are essentially manmade, and thus regulated by the principle of profit governing the returns to all forms of capital. Neoclassical economics has settled definitively on the latter interpretation. But the key point here is that this whole problematic which has importantly characterized modern economic thought is one that already takes it as granted that an “economic” understanding of land is one that pays attention solely to the purely monetary revenues that it yields. Indeed, even the more critical work of Marxist economic geographers, whilst seeking to recapture a sense of land’s spatiality, I suggested, has largely proceeded to operate on this same conceptual basis.

It is well beyond the scope of this chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, to offer a thoroughly contextualized explanation for these shifts, though the later chapters do offer some further reflections on these. A great number of factors of a variously political, economic, technological, and indeed purely theoretical nature could be offered as causes for changes in the views of economic authors. What the thesis as a whole does aim to do, however, is to zoom in on what I suggest is one key element of this history. Adam Smith, a figure ubiquitous and often pre-eminent within histories of economic thought, has been conspicuous here by his absence. Smith’s views on land have received little detailed attention within orthodox accounts of the history of economic thought. As we will see in Chapter Three, he is in general read as aligning with what I have described as the “classical” view of land, though – it is generally agreed – failing to approach the analytical clarity of Ricardo on the subject of rent. This is a reading I seek to contend, however. In fact, I suggest, Smith’s work has in many ways much more in common with the authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than he does with the Ricardian tradition of the nineteenth

century. Crucially, as we will see, Smith conceived of land in resolutely material terms, and certainly not solely in terms of its “factor returns”. The following chapters of this thesis seek to substantiate this argument, demonstrating that Ricardo’s work in fact reconstituted Smith’s ideas on an entirely new basis, one which defined the conceptual ground for much of subsequent economic thought through to today.

## 2 – Philosophy and method

### Introduction

Amidst a general paucity of critical historical literature on land within the history of economic thought, the contributions of Tribe (1978) and Mei (2017) stand out, deserving further attention. Compared with conventional accounts of the history of economic thought, these works adopt significantly heterodox (though very different) methods, offering useful guidance regarding how we might approach the study of land in the history of economic thought. However, the concerns motivating the present thesis – particularly around land’s materiality – highlight important limitations to these approaches. In his commentary on Tribe’s earlier book, Mei emphasizes the work’s debt to Foucault (particularly Foucault 2002 [1966]), however this relationship requires critical appraisal. Given the influence of Tribe and Foucault in defining both the chronology and the approach of the present thesis, it will be useful here to consider the relation between the two in greater detail, paying attention to the broader sweep of Foucault’s work, and, in particular, his debt (most apparent in his earlier works) to a French tradition in the history and philosophy of science. Whilst this kind of consideration demonstrates that Foucault offers useful tools for thinking through the relationship between discourse and materiality, I argue that his work has two important limitations. Firstly, Foucault’s philosophical reflections on the relationship between discourse and a broader sphere of non-discursive practice are suggestive, but ultimately under-specified; secondly, the methodological implications of this relationship are not worked out in detail. I address the first by engaging with the more recent scholarly interest in questions of materiality, and particularly Karen Barad’s work in the philosophy of science; for the second, I turn to Stuart Elden’s work on territory, finding his emphasis on practice, and on a multi-faceted history of thought approach, instructive. By way of situating this discussion, however, the chapter begins by addressing philosophical aspects of orthodox approaches to the history of economic thought, and some of the established debates in this field.

## Historiographical issues within the history of economic thought

As historians of economic thought have often noted, through to the 1930s, the history of the discipline was an integral part of economics itself (Klaes 2003). Prior to the second world war, therefore, the history of economics was almost exclusively the preserve of practicing economists. Since this time, however, interest in the history of the discipline amongst practitioners has declined significantly. As a number of commentators have noted, a key factor in this shift was the growing dominance within orthodox economics of a positivistic view of the discipline as a science, which suggests (on the model of the “hard” sciences) that only the most recent contributions to the discipline are relevant for the practicing economist (e.g. Blaug 2001, 146).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, some notable economists have expressed outright hostility to the history of the subject. Though somewhat older, Arthur Pigou’s pejorative description of this history as the “wrong opinions of dead men” is taken by many authors within the history of economic thought as indicative of an attitude still persistent amongst practicing economists.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, the history of economics becomes, at best, a kind of antiquarian entertainment.

In spite of its self-conscious emergence in response to a decline of interest amongst practitioners, the history of economic thought as a distinct discipline has, for the most part, continued to be characterized by a strong allegiance to modern economics. As such, a majority of this now significant literature remains written with the practicing economist firmly in mind.<sup>38</sup> Whilst the emergence of the history of economic thought as a field in its own right since the second world war has paralleled the disciplinary separation of other sciences from their respective histories, the field’s insistence on its allegiance to economics has limited the extent of its integration with broader currents in the history of science (see Schabas 1992, 2002). Simultaneously, whilst methodological controversies within the history of economic thought have paid some attention to

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<sup>36</sup> This view entails the belief that the development of economic science is characterized by a continuous progression from error to truth which renders – for the practitioner – all efforts to understand anything but the most recent contributions to their discipline entirely superfluous. Boulding, for example, talks about this in terms of the shortness of the “extended present” in modern economics (1971, 228). Roncaglia, instead, refers to this positivistic tendency as the “cumulative view” of economics as a science (2017, 1).

<sup>37</sup> According to Moggridge, this quote was attributed to Pigou by Keynes (1992, xvi).

<sup>38</sup> In evidence of this, it is indicative that almost all defences of the continuing relevance of the history of economic thought are phrased in terms of the utility of the field for contemporary economists (Boulding 1971; e.g. Backhouse 1985; Vaughn 1993; Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 4; Kurz 2006; Caldwell 2013, 755; Roncaglia 2017, 1).

historiographical debates in other related areas such as general history, history of political thought, and history of philosophy (see Klaes 2003), I suggest that the continuing image of the discipline as being written *by* economists, *for* economists, has also continued to limit the scope of its integration of a broader range of approaches found in these related fields. In particular, the history of economic thought's continued commitment to speaking in terms readily comprehensible to the modern economist has led to a preponderant presentism in the discipline, a tendency criticized by Keith Tribe as "the continuing inability of historians of economics to let go of modern economic principles and adopt instead genuine historical methods in their approach to the history of economics" (Tribe 2010, 349).

The work of Mark Blaug is instructive here, both due to his influence within the history of economic thought, and for how the historiographical positions he outlines indicate something about the relationship of the history of economic thought to other fields. In his *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (1997 [1968]) Blaug identified within the history of economic thought an opposition between relativist and absolutist approaches. In his words:

The relativist regards every single theory put forward in the past as a more or less faithful reflection of contemporary conditions... the absolutist has eyes only for the strictly intellectual development of the subject, regarded as a steady progression from error to truth. Relativists cannot rank the theories of different periods in terms of better or worse; absolutists cannot help but do so (*ibid.*, 2)

This distinction, in short, concerns whether the historian of economics should set out to judge the past on its own terms (the relativist position), or according to the standards of today's economic science (absolutism). More specifically, this distinction concerns how to deal with the apparent shortcomings of historical texts. Should these be judged – in absolutist fashion – by the standards of subsequent theoretical developments, and thus be designated simply as errors or failures to see the logical conclusions which others might later have developed from similar foundations? Or should the historian try harder to explain fundamental differences between past theories and subsequent economics, searching for explanations of such difference in intellectual or social historical contexts?

Here, Blaug firmly rejected the relativist position, at least in its strongest forms, suggesting that the relativist position "frequently amounts to a kind of white-washing [of theoretical error] with

historical necessity” (*ibid.*, 3), thus ignoring the internal progress in the techniques and analytical constructs within the discipline of economics. Within absolutism, there is therefore an implicit (and indeed often explicit) progressivism, which assumes the superiority of subsequent economic theory as a given. As Matthias Klaes notes (2003, 500), this progressivism is not perhaps a necessary feature of an absolutist position – it is also, for example, possible to write histories of economic thought in terms of a decline from truth to error. However, there is a strong tradition within the history of economic thought of linking absolutism and progressivism in the production of what are pejoratively known, following Butterfield (1931), as “Whig” histories – a genre that emphasizes the progressive perfection of economics as a disciplinary body of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Amongst these have been counted Schumpeter’s monumental, though unfinished, *History of Economic Analysis* (1994 [1954]), the work of Blaug’s under consideration here (1997 [1968]), and – by his own admission – much of the work of Paul Samuelson (see Samuelson 1987, though this has been contested more recently by Weintraub 2016).

In subsequent work, however, Blaug sought to replace the terminology of absolutism and relativism (Blaug 1990, 2001; see also Davis 2013). Following Richard Rorty’s work on the historiography of philosophy (1984), he suggested that a more appropriate distinction was that between the approaches of “rational reconstruction” and “historical reconstruction”. Rational reconstruction, Blaug explained, treats thinkers of the past (in absolutist fashion) as contemporaries with whom we can exchange ideas, and whose ideas we can legitimately critique on the basis of subsequent developments within the discipline (1990, 28). The task then becomes essentially to translate the reasoning of these historical thinkers into more recent terminology, in order to facilitate such a conversation. In practice, when dealing with older thinkers in particular, this has often involved attempts to express in the kind of mathematical terms more familiar to present-day economists what might originally have been argued purely as prose (see Waterman

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<sup>39</sup> The idea of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Butterfield 1931) denotes the tendency of histories to see the past as characterized by an ineluctable progress towards the present, resulting in a glorification of this present, and an inattention to the aspects of history that do not fit this pattern. The term “Whig” – originally an insult in the seventeenth century English Parliament directed at supporters of the Calvinist tendencies within the Anglican church – was used by Butterfield to criticize the kind of histories exemplified by the nineteenth century Whig politician Thomas Babington Macaulay’s account of English constitutional history as the progressive perfection of liberal parliamentary democracy. On the idea of Whig history, see also Goodacre (2014). For critiques of a lack of historical commitment in the writing of history of economic thought, see, for example, Coats (1969), Tribe (2010).

2003). This approach has been highly influential within the history of economic thought as a discipline, and, indeed, as a genre, rational reconstruction appears to be alive and well today (e.g. Asproumouros 1997; Whitaker 2001; Wong 2006; Salvadori and Signorino 2007; Wagner 2015, 2017; Di Matteo 2016).

Historical reconstruction, by contrast, is an approach that is explicitly linked by Rorty to the work of Quentin Skinner in the history of political thought. In his own methodological reflections, Skinner develops his position – now often seen as definitive of the “Cambridge School” of contextualist history<sup>40</sup> – in considerable detail (see Skinner 2002, 80). For Skinner, the key task of the intellectual historian is to recover the meaning intended by the original author of a text – “to see things their way” (*ibid.*, 3). But historical distance imposes a number of barriers to this aim. In the first instance, the author might adopt what Skinner terms “oblique rhetorical strategies” (*ibid.*, 80) such as irony, or disguising their actual beliefs – for political or other reasons – which might confound overly-straightforward attempts to grasp the author’s intention. More fundamentally, however, we cannot assume that the terminology we encounter in historical texts – even when it appears familiar – carries precisely the same range of meanings, connotations, or associations that we might assign to these words today. Put otherwise, it is, he suggests, a Whiggish fallacy to think that every term that refers to a clear concept must have a direct correlative in our contemporary language (*ibid.*, 48). As a result, Skinner’s position is that the meaning of a text can only really be understood in relation to the constellation of ideas, norms, political debates, etc., in which it was produced, and it is this that must be reconstructed, as far as possible. In this pursuit, no detail should be considered too trivial, since to dismiss, for example, the religious views of an author as irrelevant, “may well be to impose... a deeply anachronistic view of how to divide up the world” (*ibid.*, 43).

It is therefore, for Skinner, not only ideas or opinions themselves that are subject to variation between different temporal and cultural contexts, but the very basis on which “rational” opinion might be formed. According to this view, there is – contra absolutist or rational reconstructionist positions in the history of economic thought – nothing like a universal set of “epistemic standards”

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<sup>40</sup> For a critical account of the Cambridge School, and its longer history, see Alexander (2016).



(*ibid.*, 37) that can be identified. Instead, texts must be judged according to prevailing epistemic norms and beliefs at a given time and in a given culture. But Skinner is careful to qualify this. In defending against accusations of relativism, Skinner seeks to differentiate between his position, which he characterizes as relativizing the idea of “holding true” a given belief (the idea that we might judge it as rational for a historical agent to have held a particular belief which is now not seen as rationally acceptable), from what he calls “conceptual relativism” (*ibid.*, 51). The latter, he suggests, implies that beliefs that might be regarded as false today could in fact have been true in the times at which historical agents were writing. Instead, it is not truth itself, but “the question of what it may be rational for us to hold true [that] will vary with the totality of our beliefs” (*ibid.*). It follows from this that historians should adopt the “golden rule” that “however bizarre the beliefs we are studying may seem to be, we must begin by trying to make the agents who accepted them appear as rational as possible” (*ibid.*, 40).

According to this account, the absolutist/relativist positions appear to map more or less directly onto the approaches of rational and historical reconstruction, respectively (albeit a moderate relativism if we follow Skinner’s words). Though this is the view suggested by Blaug’s Rortian derivation of the distinction between rational and historical reconstruction, in practice those undertaking rational reconstructions have paid much greater heed to an alternative basis for this approach in the work of Imre Lakatos in the philosophy of science (Lakatos 1978).<sup>41</sup> The work of Lakatos has had significant influence within the history of economic thought (see, variously, Khalil 1987; Backhouse 1994; Signorino 2003; Roncaglia 2017) – indeed Blaug had himself expressed at least a partial acceptance of Lakatos’ view of science in an earlier paper (see Blaug 1975).<sup>42</sup> As Waterman (2003, 553) notes, Lakatos’ work posits a highly rationalist view of science whereby “external” (i.e. social, or psychological) factors can be separated from the purely “internal” development of the science. In this view, it is only within this internal sphere – a sphere comprised solely of “hard factual propositions and inductive generalizations” (Lakatos 1978, 104)

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<sup>41</sup> Blaug’s own relation to the ideas of rational and historical reconstructions would seem to be complicated by his own earlier partial acceptance of Lakatos, especially as contrasted to what Blaug saw as the highly relativist ideas of Thomas Kuhn (Blaug 1975).

<sup>42</sup> The chronology may look amiss here. Lakatos’ influential work *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* was not published until 1978, whereas Blaug’s assessment of Lakatos was published in 1975. It remains fair to consider Blaug’s comments as directed at the later work however, since the 1978 work included much material already developed in earlier publications, on which Blaug’s assessment was formed.

– that progress in scientific knowledge is constituted and can be recognized as such. For Lakatos, it is this internal development that is therefore the proper concern of the history of science, and that should therefore be the object of a specifically *rational* reconstruction.

Lakatos' work, in turn, is heavily indebted to that of Karl Popper whose *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (2002 [1934]), famously put forward a model of falsification as the key criterion for the demarcation of science. Lakatos' intervention was to modify what was sometimes seen as the overly strict requirements of falsification – when read as suggesting that only a single piece of countervailing evidence might invalidate a theory – to account more accurately for actual scientific practice. He did this by developing a notion of the “scientific research programme” (Lakatos 1978, 76). This allows for the possibility that scientists might not immediately discard a theory in light of contradictory evidence, if that theory still provided promising ground for future research. Instead, it allows for the possibility that scientists might create modifications or exceptions to the theory in order to account for divergent empirical observations. Lakatos' is keen to stress that his notion of the scientific research programme should not be read as following the work of Thomas Kuhn (*ibid.*, 90), whose (also influential) notion of “paradigms” can be read as relativizing notions of objective scientific progress.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst the terminology of “rational reconstruction” is one adopted by Lakatos, this is not here contrasted to “historical reconstruction”. Indeed, within the Lakatosian system, the term is redundant, at least in terms of pointing to a method for understanding the development of science. Lakatos does recognize “external history” as a necessary correlative of the kind of internalist approach that he suggests is proper to the history of science, but this external history is unequivocally secondary. Importantly, for Lakatos, whilst the “residual non-rational factors” (*ibid.*, 118) that constitute external history might impinge on the progress of a particular research programme, they do not play a constitutive role in the scientific knowledge that such a programme generates. Science in this sense remains a progressive accrual of objective truths, albeit that the progress imagined is somewhat less linear than that of the Popperian model. To the extent that

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<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Blaug (1975) stridently accuses Kuhn of relativism, favouring the approach of Lakatos. Lakatos' own comments, by contrast, are somewhat more moderate (e.g. 1978, 136, n.1). As a whole, however, Lakatos is responding to the famous Popper-Kuhn debate in the philosophy of science, and comes down firmly on the side of the former.

external history cannot impinge on the (internal) content of science directly, external history is relegated to explaining “*in the footnotes* how actual history ‘misbehaved’ in the light of its rational reconstruction” (*ibid.*, 120, italics in original). As Klaes notes, this reduces any would-be attempt toward historical reconstruction under this schema to a mere “sociology of scientific error” (2003, 502; see also Bloor 1991, pp. 9–10).

In practice, the extent to which rational reconstructions in the history of economic thought succeed (or fail) in relegating “external history” varies from case to case. As Blaug notes, the two approaches are not always neatly delineated (2001, 152). However, it remains clear that, as a genre, historical reconstruction in the (Skinnerian) sense implied by Rorty trails far behind rational reconstruction in popularity within the history of economic thought.<sup>44</sup> Avowed rational reconstructions such as those by Salvadori and Signorino (2015) often succeed quite literally in relegating historical context to the footnotes. But even where the label of rational reconstruction is not explicitly adopted, much work within the history of economic thought continues to rest implicitly on this kind of approach by eschewing properly historical methods. Instead, as the quote from Tribe above suggested, much work in the history of economic thought continues to rely on the conceptual language of subsequent economics as a basis on which to form its judgements of older texts.

It should by now be clear that there are numerous problems with absolutism and the rational reconstructionist position. As an approach to history, rational reconstruction is ultimately self-negating, in that it assumes simultaneously both that theories of the past are wholly commensurable with theories of the present, and that the theoretical tools of the present are unquestionably superior.<sup>45</sup> If, as suggested above, the history of economic thought as a field in its

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<sup>44</sup> As we will see in Chapter Three, there is a significant specialist historicist literature on Smith, as well as important contextualist work on the Scottish Enlightenment. Some of this does also touch on Ricardo and other early nineteenth century political economists – notably the work of Donald Winch (1965, 1978, 1987, 1996b, 1996a). Other broadly historicist work on the history of economic thought includes that of Heilbroner (1988, 2000) Terence Hutchison (e.g. 1988, 1989, 1994), Ronald Meek (1976, 1977, 2003), and Keith Tribe (1978, 1995, 2015). But, even where “rational reconstruction” is not explicitly adopted, the majority of commentary on economic thought after the turn of the nineteenth century is from economists and historians of economic thought, adopting, to varying degrees, the language of subsequent economics to describe the work of earlier authors.

<sup>45</sup> Although Blaug embraced rational reconstruction when he first proposed the distinction from historical reconstruction (Blaug 1990), in his later work, Blaug came to acknowledge this critique, suggesting that rational reconstruction, in fact, rendered the history of economic thought itself “ultimately dispensable” (2001, 152).

own right was born as a reaction to the positivist orthodoxy amongst economic practitioners, it is ironic that tendencies towards a Lakatosian position in the history of economic thought seem ultimately to reproduce this self-negation by keeping fundamental facets of a positivistic notion of science – rationalism and progressivism – intact.<sup>46</sup> The Lakatosian position hangs on a dubious internal/external distinction which seeks to disavow the influence of all “non-rational factors” to the content of science. But in the case of economics, perhaps more obviously than in other sciences, its content *qua* “science” is necessarily and irreducibly grounded in the concrete and often mundane practices (such as taxation, or property law) of the world in which it is produced. To attempt to extract its concepts from this context is – I suggest – to risk rendering them analytically vacuous. Moreover, there is a strong and questionable normativity implied by rendering the entire sociological foundation of modern economic thought so unquestionably self-evident that it can be placed beyond the purview of the science itself (and its history).<sup>47</sup>

It must be borne in mind that the Lakatosian position is purposively geared towards offering a normative account of science – how science *should* operate – rather than a purely descriptive one (Lakatos 1978, 102). This is undoubtedly because of its roots in Popper’s answer to the Kantian problem of demarcation (how to distinguish science from non-science). By positing purely rational criteria for science, Lakatos obliges himself to banish non-rational factors at play in science to a sphere of externality. This might appear more plausible in relation to the “hard” sciences, especially physics.<sup>48</sup> However, as a foundation for the study of economic thought it seems perverse. Such an approach might satisfy the long-standing desire of the history of economic thought to cement its disciplinary allegiance with economics. Yet as a foundation for a genuinely historical understanding of economic thought, this seems unhelpful at best. Beyond the reasons already given above, I suggest this is particularly so because it creates a somewhat artificial divide between theory and the materiality of the world with which this theory engages. Though there are

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<sup>46</sup> It is worth mentioning briefly the refutation of the positivist label by Popper, given his influence on Lakatos. Popper himself dubbed this the “Popper legend”, on the basis that his falsificationist model was opposed to the verificationism of Rudolph Carnap and the Vienna Circle. However, as Stadler suggests, the actual nature of his relation to the Vienna Circle was more ambivalent (Stadler 2015, 250).

<sup>47</sup> For approaches that explicitly seeks to expose the kinds of normativities encoded by economic thought, see Thorup (2016), Watson (2017).

<sup>48</sup> Though even here, other philosophers of science have called into question the validity of such a distinction. This includes Karen Barad, whose work is investigated in more detail below.

very good reasons to be cautious about the way we understand the relationship between theory and the world it describes,<sup>49</sup> this view of science precludes, for example, linking particular theoretical developments to shifts in the “real” economy.

For these reasons, this study therefore tends towards a historicist approach. However, whilst acknowledging the importance of many of Skinner’s methodological injunctions (the application of which is discussed further below), for the present purposes “historical reconstruction”, as laid out in Blaug’s Rortian schema, also has significant limitations. Three points in particular are worth mentioning here. First, the grounding of Skinner’s approach in the history of *political* thought means it gives relatively little special consideration to the specificity of scientific theorizing. Given Skinner’s insistence on the importance of paying attention to even the smallest of details in relation to the context of an author’s ideas, however, he would surely have to support the idea that we must take as seriously as possible the longstanding claims of (political) economists to be engaging in science. However, to do so inevitably requires taking some kind of position on the nature of scientific activity. Skinner’s comments on truth offer no clear guidance in this respect. Secondly, Skinner’s insistence on the primacy of authorial intention as the locus of meaning in historical texts seems unhelpfully restrictive. A number of objections can be raised to this.<sup>50</sup> For the present purposes, however, meanings that emerge “discursively”, that is, within a network of meanings and associations that connect texts, are seen as more important. Finally, the Skinnerian brand of (in Blaug’s words) “moderate relativism” gives primacy to intellectual context and so the role of ideas, but in doing so, it leaves itself open to charges of idealism, and an inattention to the role of more material factors.<sup>51</sup>

The problem of idealism, then, is a more general one for the history of economic thought. The Lakatosian approach, with its strict internal/external divide, allows no scope for relating the

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<sup>49</sup> An issue which becomes important within the work of Keith Tribe, discussed below.

<sup>50</sup> For a much more detailed examination of problems of authorship and intentionality, see Vivienne Brown (2003).

<sup>51</sup> This charge has been made forcefully by Ellen Meiksins Wood, who accuses Skinner of focussing narrowly on “elite debates” at the expense of discussing the “social relations of production” that provide the material context of political texts. Whilst I do not subscribe here to Wood’s version of Marxist historical materialism, the point stands in relation to materiality, more broadly conceived. The tendency of Cambridge School contextualism towards idealism has also been noted, albeit in a very different way, by Klaes (2003), who suggests that this represents a problem for the history of economic thought.

progress of ideas to broader material conditions. Simultaneously, the model of “historical reconstruction” that Blaug offers as an alternative also seems open to charges of idealism. In fact, materialist relativist approaches do exist within the history of economic thought.<sup>52</sup> But, as Tribe argues (1978, 8), these suffer from the opposite problem of positing an overly simplistic view of the relationship between economic ideas and material conditions, suggesting that economic ideas can simply be read off from the “real economy” that they seek to describe. The problem of the relation between ideas and materiality therefore remains an awkward one for established approaches within the history of economic thought, a problem which I have suggested becomes more acute in relation to a more properly historical apprehension of the role of land.

In his later article where Blaug recants and embraces historical reconstruction, he unexpectedly gestures towards linking this approach to that of Michel Foucault, on the basis that, in Blaug’s words, “all texts of the past need to be reconstructed because they do not speak with one voice and are never unambiguous” (Blaug 2001, 151). This is suggestive but ultimately unhelpful, partly for the simple reason that Blaug provides no references or explanation for this rather cryptic-sounding statement, but also because – as we have seen – the Skinnerian derivation of historical reconstruction as a method suggested by his previous reliance on Rorty would seem to pull in a rather different direction. A few further passing references within the historiographical literature aside (e.g. Brown 1993, 75, 2003, 549; Emmett 2003, 534), Foucault’s work has been largely overlooked within the history of economic thought as a discipline.<sup>53</sup> Yet I suggest that Foucault

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<sup>52</sup> Approaches such as that of Dasgupta (e.g. Dasgupta 1985) oppose the internalist notion that progressive developments in economics are attributable to a purely rational refinement of its theoretical tools, instead linking changes in theory to shifts in prevailing conditions within the “real economy” that the theory seeks to describe. In Dasgupta’s words: “a system of economic theory evolves in response to questions that are provoked by a given set of circumstances in an economy”, thus ideas such as marginalism and the labour theory of value are incommensurable because they belong to “different planes of discourse” (1985, 4). Here the idea is that it is divergent material conditions that give rise to different forms of economic theory. Because of this grounding in contemporary economic conditions, a superseding theory cannot therefore be said to constitute “progress” over the one it replaces.

<sup>53</sup> A few exceptions are notable. Schabas (2009, pp. 17–8) notes Foucault’s work on political economy, though she offers a rather misleading and dismissive interpretation. From a broader history of science perspective, Mirowski’s *More Heat than Light* (1989) draws inspiration from Foucault’s earlier work on the human sciences (discussed in more detail below), though it offers a highly divergent account which argues instead for the links between economics and the physical sciences. Vivienne Brown’s work on *Adam Smith’s Discourse* (1994, 2, n.3) does reference Foucault as one of a number of key figures who have influenced challenges to the primacy of authorial intention in textual exegesis, but there is no further engagement with his work in general, or on political economy specifically. As will be explored within the next section, Foucault is an important – if not explicitly acknowledged – influence on Tribe’s *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse*. The only work that engages directly with *Foucault’s archaeology of political economy* is that of Iara Vigo de Lima (2010; see also Vigo de Lima and Guizzo 2015). There are signs of increasing interest in Foucault in a

in fact has much to offer the historical study of economic thought, offering potential solutions to the some of the shortcomings of Skinnerian historical reconstruction suggested above. The following section looks in more detail at Foucault's work, and the links within the Tribe's work on land. I suggest that re-establishing the often-overlooked foundations of Foucault's work in a quite different tradition of the history and philosophy of science to that described above helps us to understand how his work offers ways out of the idealist-materialist dichotomy.

## **Tribe and Foucault: the archaeology of economic thought**

As discussed in the thesis introduction, to date, Keith Tribe's *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* (1978), and Todd Mei's *Land and the Given Economy* (2017) remain the only works which explicitly foreground the question of land's role within the history of economic thought. Whilst both are excellent in their own right, I have also suggested that, as studies of land, they share the significant limitation of reducing land to rent. Nevertheless, these works remain of interest for their strikingly heterodox methodological approaches, which diverge significantly from the kinds of established approaches within the history of economic thought discussed in the previous section. Here, it is Tribe's work that is of particular interest, since this has influenced both the chronology and, to an extent, the approach of the present study. Mei's commentary on Tribe's approach is useful, emphasizing the debt of his discursive method to the work of Foucault (particularly Foucault 2002 [1966]). But the nature of this debt is not immediately obvious, given Tribe's lack of commentary. The Tribe-Foucault link is itself, therefore, in need of some "reconstruction". Given that Foucault influences philosophical and methodological aspects of the present approach, looking briefly at how his work was applied within Tribe's earlier piece on land is instructive.

The specificity of Tribe's approach has been noted within discussions of the historiography of economics. Of this commentary, two points are worth noting in relation to the above account of these historiographical debates. Firstly, in the terms of the distinction put forward by the early

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number of more recent contributions. Bernard Harcourt's contribution to a recent collection of *New Perspectives on the history of political economy* edited by Fredona and Reinert (2018) draws on Foucault's work on prisons and political economy. A number of the contributors to the recent collection by Adelman and Packham similarly make reference to Foucault's work (2018). See also (Barney and Montag 2018).

Blaug, Tribe's approach is certainly relativist. But it is a form of relativism that departs from both materialist relativism and Skinnerian historical reconstruction. As Klaes (2003, 500) notes, the relativism of Tribe's work consists in seeking to demonstrate the historical contingency of the key conceptual categories of rent and labour, thus revealing how applying present day understandings of these terms generates misleading readings of various intellectual traditions which are generally counted as fore-runners of modern economics. Secondly, Quentin Skinner would surely agree with Tribe's emphasis on the importance of understanding key concepts in their proper context. However, as Vivienne Brown (1993, 73, n.13) has noted, Tribe clearly disavows Skinner's emphasis on intentionality with its implication that the unitary author acts as the sole custodian of meaning. Instead, Tribe's interest is in the conceptual configurations that constitute particular "discursive formations" (Tribe 1978, 5), a notion quite at odds with the recovery of authorial intention privileged by Skinner.

Mei's reading of Tribe's work seems to imply that it can be read as effectively continuous with Foucault's earlier work (Mei 2017, 29). Whilst I agree with the general sentiment that Tribe should be read as following Foucault, this claim requires some critical assessment, not least since the debt to Foucault is mostly implied rather than made explicit by Tribe.<sup>54</sup> Discussing his own methodology, Tribe links his approach not to Foucault, but rather to Gaston Bachelard's work in the philosophy of science. This discursive method, Tribe tells us, focusses on concepts, and the specific configurations of these that are particular to certain "discursive forms", an approach which places emphasis on the presence and absence of key conceptual associations. Despite engaging with texts within the canon of the economic thought, the approach is itself avowedly non-historical to the extent that it purports to offer a more analytical account of the conceptual associations (especially those around land and labour) that characterize particular discourses (1978, 3).

This approach has clear affinities with the "archaeological" method adopted by Foucault in his earlier work, particularly *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]). Here, however, Foucault's argument is of a much more expansive nature than Tribe's. The book seeks to evidence the claim that broad areas of Western thought since the sixteenth century have shared a series of underlying and

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<sup>54</sup> In spite of what seem strong links between their approaches, references to Foucault's work appear only in the closing passages of Tribe's book (1978, 161).



unspoken epistemic assumptions that have long gone un-recognized, assumptions which span across areas of thought, and which have been subject, at various points, to radical reconfiguration. The interest here is in the intellectual terrain covered by the modern “human sciences” – that which, Foucault suggests, concerns living beings, languages, or economic facts (*ibid.*, ix) – including modern biology, philology, and political economy, which emerged in the nineteenth century and what are often claimed as their forerunners, including natural history, general grammar, and the various discourses of what he terms the “analysis of wealth” in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whilst the histories of these disciplines are usually told in terms of a more or less linear progression within discrete areas of thought (as is the case in the history of economic thought), Foucault suggests instead that there are commonalities underlying these diverse areas of enquiry which have importantly given shape to what, in each period, it has been possible to say. Foucault suggests that these epistemic assumptions have been subject to two great re-configurations since the sixteenth century, demarcating what he terms renaissance, classical, and modern *epistemai*.

In relation to the canon of economic thought, this account describes a transition from the “analysis of wealth” – which includes, like Tribe, doctrines such as physiocracy – to “political economy”, the latter emerging only in the writings of the early nineteenth century, and particularly in those of David Ricardo. For Foucault, in each period, seemingly divergent schools of thought can instead be understood to share fundamental assumptions about what constituted their domain of analysis. The particular conceptual configurations that constituted these domains – in the case of the analysis of wealth, for example, key nodes included money, price, value, circulation, and market (*ibid.*, 182) – were largely stable. In this account, debates, for example over the nature of value, are seen to have arisen almost automatically as a result of the existence of divergent possible ways of traversing this conceptual “network of necessity” (*ibid.*, 208). But the intellectual ground of the analysis of wealth, Foucault suggests, is decisively *not* that of political economy, in spite of what seem, superficially at least, as continuities of themes and terminology. Crucially, though, as Ian Hacking has argued (1979), the nature of Foucault’s argument within *The Order of Things* is very specific. The effort is not a hermeneutic one – that is, one of interpreting texts – but rather of examining the formal connections between utterances in order to expose the conditions of possibility for scientific knowledge. Foucault’s concern here is not directly with the content of economic thought, then, but rather with the discursive structures, or webs of conceptual relations,

that authors engaging with these domains of thought must traverse.

Tribe's gesture towards the importance of Gaston Bachelard is striking, since Foucault is well known to have been influenced by the latter's work (e.g. Alcoff 2013; Cook 2018). In his own work, Bachelard (1884-1962) focussed mainly on the epistemology of the "hard" sciences—mathematics, physics, and chemistry. A central theme of this work is the novelty of what Bachelard calls the "New Physics", by which he refers to a range of theoretical innovations (including quantum mechanics) that followed Einstein's positing of the theory of relativity in 1905, and particularly the challenges that such innovations posed to traditional philosophy. Particularly significant was the extent to which the New Physics implied a radical challenge to the realism on which all prior post-Newtonian science had been based. Phenomena could no longer be understood as simple, but instead every phenomenon appeared as a "fabric of relations", and every substance a "web of attributes" (Bachelard 1985 [1934], 148). Relativity had also rendered untenable the Cartesian belief that the scientist was an entirely detached observer, in no way interacting with the objective reality that he studied.

In the same way that phenomena could no longer be understood as simple, knowable expressions of an objective reality, Bachelard emphasized the inherent complexity of ideas. Concepts, he suggested, do not correspond in any direct way to an objective reality, but rather gain meaning only in relation to other concepts and ideas. The determination of reality as constituted by a set of independent, atomistic objects is not therefore something inherent in the nature of reality itself, but is a rational process; objectivity is not something given, but "something learned with great difficulty" (*ibid.*, 11). Every scientific observation is therefore always-already theory-laden, and any apparent self-evidence in phenomena is an illusion: "Nothing is self-evident... Nothing is given... Everything is constructed" (Bachelard 2002 [1938], 25). Even the very tools of scientific measurement are implicated in this process, constituting "phenomeno-technologies" (Bachelard 1985 [1934], x) that serve to give structure to the forms in which reality is understood.

The revolutionary character of the epistemology implied by the New Physics prompted Bachelard to reflect on what he saw as the stadal nature of the history of science. In *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* (Bachelard 2002 [1938]), he posited a theory of scientific progress proposing that in

each era there exist various unspoken and unquestioned “obstacles” to knowledge. These take the form of the self-evident truths of an era which act as barriers to the progress of scientific understanding (*ibid.*, 18) and are sustained by the influence of various established ideologies. The history of science is therefore constituted by a series of “breaks” that occur when these *a priori* assumptions are finally confronted and dismantled. It is significant for the present investigation that in adopting this approach to the historical constitution of scientific discourse Bachelard seeks to delineate between conventional history of thought and a historical epistemology of the kind that he proposed. As opposed to taking ideas as historical “facts”, the job of the epistemologist is to establish for each idea the “array of concepts” (*ibid.*, 28) from which it is produced and in which it gains meaning. In this way, the epistemologist engages in a historicization of the discursive practices according to which truth has been determined in previous eras.

This understanding of knowledge, and the methods by which it can be studied, were highly influential on Foucault, and the echo of Bachelard’s thought can be most acutely felt in Foucault’s work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, during which time he developed a method he termed *archaeology* (Foucault 2003 [1963], 2002 [1966], 1972 [1969]).<sup>55</sup> This entailed an analysis of discourse that sought to identify its underlying “rules of formation” (Foucault 2002 [1966], xii) the unspoken assumptions that in each age gave rise to the particular nexus of concepts and ideas that constituted knowledge. Following Bachelard, Foucault suggested that these rules, or *epistemai*, were subject to periodic thoroughgoing reconfigurations, by which the conditions for the production of knowledge were radically altered. Archaeology (like Bachelard’s epistemology) therefore consisted in the analysis of historical discourse in order to determine the rules that governed its formation in each era, and the moments of discontinuity, in which these were re-made.

But, a key divergence from Bachelard in Foucault’s archaeology is a focus on the much more obviously socially determined “human” sciences. A key link, in this respect, between Foucault and Bachelard, is the figure of Georges Canguilhem.<sup>56</sup> Whilst Bachelard’s insights were those of a philosopher who was also a practicing chemist, Canguilhem (1904-95), who succeeded Bachelard

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<sup>55</sup> The relation between Foucault and Bachelard has been covered by Dominique Lecourt (1975) and Gary Gutting (1989), as well as more recently in Stuart Elden’s work on *Canguilhem* (2019).

<sup>56</sup> See, again, Elden (2019) on the relationship between Foucault and Canguilhem, which has also recently been covered in Samuel Talcott’s *Georges Canguilhem and the problem of error* (Talcott 2019).

as director of the *Institut d'histoire des sciences* at the Sorbonne, offered a view of the history of sciences that, whilst drawing strongly on Bachelard's work, was also informed to a great extent by a formal training in medicine. As such, Canguilhem's work draws on a body of knowledge that does not display the same apparent hermetic isolation of the "natural" sciences from the messy contingencies of the social world. As he notes in relation to conventional modern understandings of disease: "[t]he impetus behind every ontological theory of disease undoubtedly derives from therapeutic need" (Canguilhem 1994, 321). Of particular interest to Canguilhem, however, was the role of the concept of "normality" in modern medicine. He suggested that the aim of medical science was not to reduce the suffering of a patient *per se*, but simply to restore him to a condition of normality, an imperative of which Canguilhem was highly critical. He sought to show that such notions of normality were a peculiarly modern invention that presupposed forms of thinking and modes of data collection that have their concrete foundation in particular social institutions. Thus, for example, "[t]he definition of sanitary norms assumes that, from the political point of view, attention is paid to populations' health considered statistically, to the healthiness of conditions of existence and to the uniform dissemination of preventative and curative treatments perfected by medicine" (*ibid.*, 372). The supposed objectivity of such a science could therefore be shown to rest to a far greater extent than was commonly recognized on the contingent conditions pertaining within a society, rather than on any more universal principles of human health.

Like Bachelard, Canguilhem emphasized the constructed nature of scientific objectivity, and the key role played by concepts, going as far as to say that "without concepts, there is no science" (*ibid.*, 30). Yet the exact configuration of the conceptual nexus was, he suggested, specific to each scientific discipline, beyond whose limits any "laws" or conclusions drawn could not be extended without the discourse lapsing from the status of science into mere ideology (*ibid.*, 39). The special status of science was linked to the production of truth, conceived not in the form of transhistorical laws "permanently inscribed in objects or intellect", but rather as immanent *within* scientific discourse, the progress of which is defined by a process of continual critical self-correction. Canguilhem pronounced the contingency of scientific truth yet more emphatically, summarizing, "[t]ruth is simply what science speaks" (*ibid.*, 32). From this vantage point, the history of sciences (understood in terms of the kind of epistemological approach contrasted by Bachelard to conventional "history of thought") was seen to constitute "an axiological activity, the search for

truth” (*ibid.*, 30). However, whilst Canguilhem sought to defend a distinction between science and non-science, the implications of his work suggested that science could be defined neither in terms of the universality of its key concepts, nor in terms of its relation to a notion of transhistorical truth, rendering the identification of a stable field of “scientific” discourse problematic.

A similar broadening of the definition of science beyond the narrower field of Bachelard’s investigation of the natural sciences is clearly visible in Foucault’s work, though here it was taken much further. Foucault’s earliest investigations took up themes related to medicine, which had been a key part of Canguilhem’s work.<sup>57</sup> Yet, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault turned to the analysis of the yet more dubious sciences of “man”. In this “archaeology of the human sciences”, Foucault posited the idea that a set of shared epistemological assumptions had underpinned *all* of these sciences at any given moment in the recent history of Western thought. Like Bachelard’s epistemological obstacles, such assumptions were seen as subject to sudden reconfigurations necessitating a radical reordering of the established conceptual nexus. However, Foucault rejected the progressivism of Bachelard’s account of science, which saw conditions for knowledge as potential “obstacles” to the development of knowledge, instead emphasizing the specificity of each epistemological era, and the contingency of its forms of knowledge. Though Foucault’s archaeological works are focussed more narrowly on an analysis of discourse, his earlier investigations of medicine and psychology had already demonstrated, like Canguilhem, a concern for the relationship between forms of knowledge and their social contexts, a concern that was to reappear with a sharpened critical edge in Foucault’s later career.

Within his discussion of the transition from the analysis of wealth to political economy in *The Order of Things*, Foucault’s main interest certainly seems to be “discourse” in a more restricted sense, the focus being firmly on the particular conceptual configurations that characterize these fields of knowledge. However, Foucault at no point seeks to disavow the relationship of this narrower arena of discourse to a broader field of social practice. Indeed, even here, Foucault notes the importance of a number of eminently practical considerations, such as, for example, the minting

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault’s concern for medicine is seen most clearly in his doctoral thesis – published in English as *History of Madness* (2006 [1961]) – as well as his 1963 *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003 [1963]) addressed the medicalization of madness. However, medicine remained a recurrent, if less central, interest throughout his career, seen for example in *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1975]) and *The History of Sexuality* (1979 [1976]).

of money (Foucault 2002 [1966], 184), that shape the conceptual parameters of these discourses in crucial ways. Within this book Foucault says little explicitly about the relationship between discourse and a broader non-discursive sphere. However, some of his retrospective methodological comments in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972 [1969]) are instructive. Here, Foucault explains that discourse should be considered not as “document”, signalling some underlying essence, but instead in itself as a species of *practice*, one which obeys certain rules (*ibid.*, 138). Discursive and non-discursive practices are therefore not isolated domains, but broad and interconnected fields. To the extent that textual discourse and material practice can be differentiated, their relation is one of co-constitution. This is a fluid link however, and there is no a priori direction of causality assigned between changes in one and their registration in the other. By implication, knowledge is not a sphere of pure and unambiguous meaning, detached from the limitations of thought and the sometimes mundane practices of a given society; rather it exists as a field of human understanding shaped by and grounded in these very bounding forces.<sup>58</sup>

It is at this point that Mei’s insistence on reading Tribe’s work in continuity with Foucault’s requires some qualification. Tribe’s explicit focus on discourse and on the conceptual configurations that characterize particular discursive forms clearly bears many similarities to the approach of *The Order of Things*, as do some of the more substantive aspects of his conclusions.<sup>59</sup> However, Tribe’s comments on the relationship between discourse and a broader non-discursive sphere seem to contradict Foucault. As Tribe insists more than once in the work,

the whole process of referring a discursive order to a non-discursive one for principles of validation is misconceived (Tribe 1978, 13)

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<sup>58</sup> Limitations here are understood not as obstacles to the progress of knowledge in Bachelard’s sense, but rather as shaping forces innate to the constitution of knowledge itself.

<sup>59</sup> Tribe’s situation of Ricardo’s work as marking a break with earlier discursive forms parallels closely Foucault’s own account. The clearest piece of textual evidence for Tribe’s reliance on Foucault, however, is seen in the form taken by the more substantive conclusions he draws from the work, and the emphasis this places on the figure of “man”. In summing up his analysis, Tribe concludes, “[o]nly where Man is conceived as the constitutive element of the economy – where it is the action of this Man on external objects for the purpose of his preservation – can the terms ‘land’ and ‘labour’ be treated as... essential constituents of economic thought” (1978, 160). A key part of Foucault’s argument in *The Order of Things* (subtitled *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*) is that it is only with the shift from the classical to the modern *episteme* that we see the emergence of the figure of “man”, conceived as an object of science. Tribe’s argument does not take precisely the same form as Foucault’s, since the aims and scope of the two books are different. Nevertheless, the analysis provided by Tribe can be read as seeking to add weight to Foucault’s claim of an epistemic “break” between political economy, as it emerged in the early nineteenth century, and the various discourses that had preceded it.

The point seems to be to caution against a naïve realism – a critique directed towards more materialist accounts of economic thought, and to Marxist discussions. Tribe warns against any overly simplistic understanding of the relationship between discourse and an imagined non-discursive “reality” which is the referent of this discourse. The point is a valuable one: the relationship of any key conceptual categories – capital or class, for example – to an imagined real correlative should be treated with caution. That is to say, we should not fall into the trap of assuming that concepts are pre-given categories that correspond directly to real world phenomena. In light of this methodological injunction, it seems somewhat paradoxical that at least a part of Tribe’s analysis rests on the argument that the meaning of the term “rent” in English has shifted as social relations of property have changed.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, it remains the case that, for the majority of the work, Tribe appears to be concerned with discourse in a more narrow sense.

This point should not be overstated. It remains the case, as Mei suggests, that Tribe’s work appears to follow the argument and approach Foucault’s *The Order of Things* in many important respects. Yet I emphasize the point because a focus on practice is central to the approach taken here, accounting for important differences between Tribe’s approach to studying land and my own. As I will suggest below, a focus on a broader range of practices is important for understanding how land’s materiality is (or indeed is not) apprehended theoretically. Whilst Foucault’s archaeological approach provides essential tools for thinking through concepts and their inter-relation, its focus is on the purely formal relations that characterize particular discursive forms. The connections between discourse and practice, while suggested here, come to the fore more clearly in Foucault’s subsequent work, in which he turned from archaeology to an approach that, following Friedrich Nietzsche, he termed “genealogy”. This approach is important for the present investigation. However, even in Foucault’s later work the theorization of the relation between discourse, materiality, and practice is not extensively developed. In the next section, therefore, I simultaneously turn to the more recent work of Karen Barad in the philosophy of science. Drawing on and extending Foucault’s work, Barad helps us to specify with much greater precision

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<sup>60</sup> Tribe (1978, ch.2) argues that the essential link between land and rent, which was foundational to the emergence of political economy in the nineteenth century was contingent on a specific set of property relations that did not pertain in earlier feudal society. Rather, he suggests, in the feudal system, the primary referent of “rent” is labour, rather than land, the term referring to the obligations of feudal tenants to their superiors, rather than a payment for the use of land, as it was subsequently understood.

the relationship between discourse, materiality, and practice across sciences and non-sciences. In doing so, I suggest she provides a solid philosophical foundation for the study of land undertaken subsequently in this thesis.

## Science, materiality, discourse

Foucault's methodological reflections on the relationship between discourse and a broader field of practice are suggestive, but not extensively worked out, and in his substantive investigations, the emphasis on practice varies.<sup>61</sup> But the recent academic "turn" towards the question of materiality means that there now seems to be more at stake in this question. The new materialism espoused by Jane Bennett and others, as well as a number of related approaches encompassed within the idea of a "nonhuman turn" in scholarship (Grusin 2015b), involves at least a partial rejection of discursive – or what Bennett terms "epistemological" – methods. The charges revolve around the idea that a focus on discourse represents an overconfidence in the supremacy of human agency, and denies the importance of the role of nonhuman entities – of all kinds – in shaping the world. Indeed, following the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, the idea of the human itself is called into question (Grusin 2015a). Rather, Bennett invites us to think in terms of "agentic assemblages" (Bennett 2010, 21) of biotic and abiotic components, within which actions can only ever fall short of our intentionality. This is an avowedly ecological way of thinking – one that, as was explored in the thesis introduction, involves a rejection of notions of "the environment", on the basis that these re-inscribe a nature-culture divide (Latour 1993) which unhelpfully posits the human as somehow outside of or apart from nature.

There is much of use here. The nonhuman turn helpfully calls into question overly-anthropocentric tendencies within scholarship, and asks us to pay attention to a much broader range of considerations shaping the world in which we live. Particularly helpful, at least in Bennett's treatment, is an emphasis on the contingency of concepts. She foregrounds, via Theodor

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<sup>61</sup> A focus on practice is particularly visible, for example, in his account of the birth of the modern prison in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1991 [1975]). In his work on political economy, both in *The Order of Things* and in the later lectures, there are a number of interesting connections drawn, though these are not investigated systematically.



Adorno, the problem of non-identity: the distinction between “objects” – i.e. human categorizations imposed on the world – and “things”, understood as “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (Bennett 2010, 5). In this view there is always an excess of “thingness” not captured by a given form of objectification – a remainder, in Adorno’s terms.

Undoubtedly the charges against a narrow focus on discourse, if levelled at the most resolutely constructivist work, might hold. But the rejection of discursive or epistemological approaches, in favour of an avowedly “ontological” turn goes too far. In trying to de-centre the primacy of an exclusively human notion of agency, the new materialism, and related approaches, prefer to talk – in Latourian terms – of a panoply of non- or not-quite-human “actants” (Bennett 2010, 225; 2015, 225). But, as Andreas Malm (2018, 95) has recently countered, this risks hollowing out the concept of agency entirely. To view anything – human, animal, plant, mineral, or an assemblage of these elements – as (at least potentially) agential risks making the category of agency analytically meaningless by confounding what seems like a necessary association between agency and intentionality. For Malm, this point is of particular political significance today, given the now widely acknowledged human agency in the disruption of Earth’s climate and ecological systems, and the need to concentrate on a specifically human form of agency in order to mitigate the consequences.

Sitting somewhere between Foucault’s and related approaches to discourse, and the various Latourian new materialisms is an argument put forward by Karen Barad in her *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Barad 2007). Here, Barad sets out to provide a more philosophically rigorous account of the relationship between discourse, practice, and materiality than has been offered to date. Importantly, Barad’s explicit aim is to overcome what she sees as a persistent divide between realist epistemologies associated with the natural sciences (and more positivistic strands of the social sciences), and the kind of social constructivist approaches that have been highly influential within critical social studies in recent decades, instead offering “a unified theory of cultural and natural forces” (*ibid.*, 66) capable of reconciling the two. This, she suggests, requires taking seriously both the apparent objectivity (and effectiveness) of science and the constructed nature of concepts.

Barad's view of the significance of Foucault's work accords in many ways with the reading put forward here, though the particular terms in which she expresses this are instructive. Firstly, Barad sees Foucault as challenging what, following Ian Hacking (1983), she terms "representationalism". This, she suggests, is a dominant view, common to both scientific realism and social constructivism, that holds that language should be understood as a series of representations that correspond more or less accurately to a pre-existing reality which is the referent of these representations. Such an understanding, "separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things" (*ibid.*, 137). Foucault, according to Barad, undermines the tenets of this view, focusing instead on the constitutive aspects of discursive practices in their materiality (*ibid.*, 57). Secondly, as suggested above, Foucault does not treat language as an isolated or privileged sphere, but rather talks in terms of discursive practices which are understood as comprising a continuity of linguistic and material elements. However, Barad ultimately finds a key limitation of Foucault's approach in his failure "to provide an adequate account of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena" (*ibid.*, 145). In particular, she criticizes his tendency to limit his accounts of discursive practices to social institutions (*ibid.*, 430, n.25), as well as the restriction of his account of materialization to the human body, taking the materialization of the nonhuman as a given (*ibid.*, 204).

This is not the place to assess the validity of these critiques.<sup>62</sup> But the way Barad proposes to go beyond these limitations is instructive for the way in which it provides a philosophically compelling account of the relationship between discourse, practice, and materiality which is much more thoroughly worked through than that offered by Foucault. For Barad, the scientific experiment becomes paradigmatic. Here, the crucial factor is the implication of the entire "apparatus" – including everything from the observer to the measurement instruments, and even the concepts that generate the particular configuration of the experiment itself – in the production of the specific "phenomenon" observed.<sup>63</sup> By stressing how this entire "material-discursive" apparatus

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<sup>62</sup> Indeed, many of Barad's comments on Foucault's work are somewhat misleading, particularly in light of more recent scholarship. For example, the idea that Foucault's work excludes a consideration of the materialization of the nonhuman is challenged by Stuart Elden's recent account of *Foucault's Last Decade*, which emphasizes the breadth of Foucault's work during this period, including a series of collaborative projects looking variously at infrastructures, architecture, and green spaces (Elden 2016, pp. 82–92).

<sup>63</sup> However, Barad is keen to stress that her use of the term "phenomenon" is not intended to imply any relation to phenomenological thought, but rather describes the observed effect of a particular material-discursive apparatus.

is integral to the phenomenon itself, Barad suggests that it is possible to ground an account of scientific objectivity in the reproducibility of such phenomena, whilst simultaneously allowing for the constructed nature of its conceptual components. Concepts are thus, in some sense, “performative”, even whilst the specific phenomenon observed is simultaneously constrained by the nature of the interaction of its material components – in Barad’s words, they are “productive” but not “determinate” (*ibid.*, 143).

Whilst the paradigmatic example is drawn from the natural sciences,<sup>64</sup> the approach is designed to have a much broader relevance. Barad suggests that concepts are meaningful not in the abstract, but “by virtue of their embodiment in the physical arrangement of the apparatus” (*ibid.*, 117). The suggestion of a physical arrangement of components in this formulation clearly implies the specificity of an experiment in the natural sciences. But the way Barad constructs her account of scientific objectivity allows us to bracket off, at least provisionally, the science question (the distinction between science and non-science), in order to think more generally about the act of theorizing. For Barad, “[t]heorizing, like experimenting, is a material practice” (*ibid.*, 55). What might this mean? In Barad’s terms, whereas representationalist accounts posit “ontologically disjunct domains of words and things” (*ibid.*, 137), a non-representationalist account, like the one she proposes, recognizes that concepts only gain their usefulness by their embodiment in materialized practices.

Barad suffers from a similarly problematic attribution of “agency” to the nonhuman as some of the other new materialists. But, although she gives agency a prominent role in her philosophical schema (which, indeed, she terms “agential realism”), in this case it does not result in the same rejection of discursive approaches seen in Bennett and others. Instead she again turns back to Foucault to illuminate another potential path forward. Foucault’s work from the early 1970s was characterized by a move away from the earlier archaeological approach discussed in the previous section, and towards genealogy (see Foucault 1991 [1971]).<sup>65</sup> In contrast to the more synchronic

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<sup>64</sup> More specifically, this account draws heavily on the approach of Niels Bohr in his work on quantum mechanics, which Barad terms a “philosophy-physics” (*ibid.*, 67). The language of phenomenon, experiment, apparatus are taken directly from Bohr’s work.

<sup>65</sup> This turn to genealogy, however, does not need to be read as a rejection of archaeology, however. Foucault emphasized that the two could be understood as complementary methods (see Elden 2003, 198).

approach of the archaeology, which focussed on how unwritten rules of discourse in a given period give shape to the possible forms of knowledge, Foucault suggests that genealogy is instead concerned with the historical “descent” of ideas. The shift to genealogy thus marks a move away from a direct concern with the questions around the notion of science which some of his earlier work had emphasized. Substantively, however, a number of the “discursive formations” addressed in this earlier work – including political economy – remained important sites of investigation.

Genealogy, Foucault stresses, is not the same as a search for “origins”, since this implies “an attempt to capture the exact essence of things” (*ibid.*, 78), based on the metaphysical fallacy that the purest expression of an idea is to be found at the moment of its birth. Rather, he suggests, what is to be found instead is the “accidents, errors, and reversals” that accompany the “numberless beginnings” (*ibid.*, 81) of any idea. In this sense, like the archaeological approach, genealogy involves demonstrating the contingency of both concepts and discourses. Similarly, also, Foucault retained a commitment (if not uniformly applied) to the decisive importance of a broader set of practices in shaping discourse – seen perhaps most obviously, and most famously, in his investigation of the birth of the prison, *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1991 [1975]). Moreover, as this work on prisons signalled, the turn to genealogy also coincided with a more overt commitment to the contemporary political relevance of his historical investigations, which he came to understand as part of a project of a “history of the present”. For Foucault, genealogy was an attempt to overcome the tendency of conventional historical accounts to posit a transcendental consciousness as the subject of knowledge – one that makes supposedly objective judgements on the past – by acknowledging the inescapability of the historical context in which the observer is situated.

Barad’s critique of Foucault in relation to his genealogical method is that ultimately he fails to escape the humanistic impulse that places man at the centre of its investigations. Whether this is an accurate depiction is debatable, though it is certainly true that a genealogy of the human subject is a recurrent theme through Foucault’s work, particularly during the last decade before his death (Elden 2016, 205). Again, however, Barad’s more positive comments in response to this critique are illuminating. Whilst for some of the new materialists it is the linguistic focus of genealogy itself which places too great an emphasis on human agency, and is therefore to be rejected, for Barad,

the problem is more simply the substantive focus of the genealogies being undertaken. That is to say – as Barad sees it – in Foucault’s hands, the application of the genealogical method is too narrowly focussed on the question of the derivation of the modern human subject, at the expense of a correlative (and, indeed, already implicit) set of questions: the derivation of nonhuman objects.

Barad makes clear that within her notion of “apparatus”, the question of the subject-object distinction is central. For Barad, subject and object are characteristics conferred by the apparatus. Crucially, this means that the fault line dividing the two is not pre-given, but is rather an emergent property of the specific material-discursive apparatus being used to observe a phenomenon (Barad 2007, 143). The apparatus thus effects what she terms an “agential cut”. It is the apparatus itself that confers the “conditions of possibility for determinate boundaries and properties of objects and meanings of embodied concepts within the phenomenon” (*ibid.*, 143). This loosens the necessity of the coextension of the human and the subject of knowledge. Nevertheless, unlike the more radical new materialisms, where agency can be attributed solely to non-human “actants”, here the human remains a necessary, if not sufficient, part of this subjective portion of the apparatus. Debates around the question of agency aside, what Barad’s comments very usefully cast a light on is the extent to which, when theorizing, objects emerge as a result of an apparatus that is not necessarily *only* human. Apparatuses may instead contain any number of other material or conceptual components, which contribute to rendering a particular object determinate.

Whereas, for Bennett, the task is to re-acquaint ourselves with the “thingness” of a world not subjugated by a Cartesian subject-object grid of intelligibility,<sup>66</sup> this is a more moderate, and certainly a more practicable way forward. Barad’s suggestion is that it matters not only how we understand the human; it also matters how we understand the nonhuman world, and in order to comprehend better the nature of our understandings, we must interrogate the apparatuses through which we make the world legible. The objects of knowledge are not pre-given, but emerge and find their meaning as part of an apparatus, or perhaps a set of apparatuses through which the observable phenomena of the world are understood. Clearly, Barad is sympathetic to Foucault’s insistence that an investigation of the process by which subjects and objects are made must take a

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<sup>66</sup> An approach that Bennett self-consciously refers to as one of “methodological naiveté” (*ibid.*, 17).

broadly historical form. Although such approaches might have been labelled “epistemological” by Bennett and others, Foucault’s own description of his approach as “historical ontology” (see Elden 2003) seems more helpful. This suggests an account not simply of how objects *are*, but how they come to *be*.

Barad’s use of the term “apparatus” derives from her engagement with what she calls the “philosophy-physics” of Niels Bohr. But, I suggest, her use of the term can be read as compatible with Foucault’s broader notion of the *dispositif*. Indeed, the latter is sometimes rendered in English using precisely the same word (e.g. Foucault, 1980, 194). According to Foucault, this apparatus consists in,

a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (Foucault 1980, 194)

In the social world, therefore, the apparatus can be understood to consist in any number of elements which ground concepts, and serve to give meaning to discursive utterances. I suggest that, in spite of potential criticisms of Barad’s reading of Foucault, the philosophical approaches to questions of discourse and materiality can be read – at least for the purposes here – as broadly continuous. In stressing the importance of materiality, however, Barad places perhaps even more emphasis than Foucault on the role of practice.

## **The method of the present investigation**

Barad’s approach is philosophically instructive, but whilst lending at least implicit support to the idea that apparatuses might be studied genealogically, it says much less about how this might be undertaken, methodologically speaking. Indeed, once we have bracketed out, as I have suggested, the question of the status of economics as a science, the question of how we go about reading texts remains. In fact, freeing ourselves from the obligation to provide a normative account of science does once again broaden the horizon of possible approaches. In the introduction, I suggested that the approach taken here was in many ways closest to Stuart Elden’s work on territory. In *The Birth of Territory* (2013b) Elden identifies his approach as broadly genealogical – in

the tradition of Nietzsche, Foucault and also Martin Heidegger – but notes that this overarching ambition does not discount the use of other methodological tools. Indeed, whilst Foucault’s own methodological comments are instructive, questions persist as to how, on a practical level, we should go about reading texts.

Elden’s distinction between word, concept, and practice is helpful. This reminds us, for example, that shifts in terminology do not necessarily denote changes in underlying concepts, and vice versa. As such, the present thesis takes into account the various established meanings of the term land (as well as derivatives of the latin *terra*). More central, however, is a consideration of the relationship between land as concept and practice. As we will see, land is associated with a diverse range of practices that inform its existence *qua* economic concept. In what follows, I look at political economy both as a practice in its own right – particularly, an epistemological practice associated with the state – and as engaged with a broad range of discursive and non-discursive practices (the “apparatus” in Barad’s terms) which serve to give its utterances meaning. I will argue, in fact, that central to the differences between Smith and Ricardo is the much more thorough attention to practice paid by Smith, and, indeed, I suggest that it is particularly through this attention to practice that we see Smith engaging with the materiality of land. Ricardo’s political economy, by contrast, can still be understood as an epistemological practice in its own right, but the detailed engagement with a broad range of practices around land seen in Smith’s work is gone. Rather, what replaces it is the much more abstract understanding of land narrowly in terms of the financial revenues it yields.

The substantive work of this thesis revolves around a reading of political economic *texts* – those of Smith and Ricardo in particular. But, following Elden, these are analysed on a number of levels. Straightforward textual exegesis remains a fundamental tool. But, as Elden suggests, alone, such textual approaches are limited. The contextualist approach of the Cambridge school provides important additional tools, reminding us of the importance of situating key concepts and arguments in relation to the contemporary debates to which these spoke. However, taking a more Foucauldian perspective, Elden suggests that we should be “critical of notions that the production of meaning is reliant on authorial intent” (*ibid.*, 8). Furthermore, whilst Skinner claims that no detail is too small to be significant in the understanding of a text, I have suggested above that the

notion of “context” employed by the Cambridge School tends to be rather narrow. Elden, by contrast, encourages attention to a much broader range of practices that serve to ground theoretical concepts.

Given this, by way of conclusion, it seems necessary to account for the focus here on two texts in particular – Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, and Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* – and the approach taken to reading these. The most detailed part of the thesis involves an in depth reading of Smith’s seminal work. The focus on depth reading and exegesis might seem to imply that the main aim of this analysis is – in Skinner’s words – to uncover “what the writer in question may have meant by saying what was said” (Skinner (Skinner 2002), 78). This seems to sit uncomfortably with Foucault’s more structuralist conception of discourse, and of the role of the author.<sup>67</sup> Instead, I suggest that authorial intent is an important concern here, but *only* insofar as it informs an understanding of the conceptual and practical aspects of land that emerge from this reading, which remain the primary goal of the investigation. I hope to demonstrate that a detailed reading of Smith’s work is both necessary to counter tendencies to take land for granted within the history of economic thought, and to understand adequately the important role of specific practices in formation of a political economic conception of land. Less space is devoted to Ricardo, both because his commentary on land is much less extensive than Smith’s, and because, in this case, the existing literature offers a more convincing account of his understanding of land. My reading, however, seeks to show how, here, a particular interpretation of Smith’s theory resulted in a considerably narrowed, and thus qualitatively different, understanding of land, which came to inform the development of subsequent economic thought. It is here, I suggest, that we see the birth of what we can understand, in purely disciplinary terms, as a properly modern economic concept of land.

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<sup>67</sup> For Foucault, the notion of authorship is not pre-given but, indeed, is one with its own history (Foucault 1991, 101). In particular, he notes the contingency of the idea of the unitary author. Similar ideas are expressed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where he states that “[t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse” (Foucault 1972 [1969], 23).



## 3 – Adam Smith I: Reading *The Wealth of Nations*

### Introduction

Chapter two emphasized the central interest in discourse in the method adopted by this thesis. As such, it might appear somewhat strange that a significant part of the content of the present chapter is devoted to more traditional intellectual historical concerns, such as biography, intellectual and political context, and historiography. The inclusion of this material serves two main purposes. Firstly, it is necessary to identify and counter certain historiographical tendencies that I suggest have led to the neglect of land as a concern within *The Wealth of Nations*. These are broadly two: the tendency of historians of economic thought to read Smith in terms provided by subsequent political economy (what I will later suggest is in fact a Ricardian lens), and the tendency of historians of political thought to seek to downplay the Physiocratic influence in Smith's writing. The explanation of this requires some knowledge of Smith's biography and the history of Smith scholarship, however, which is summarized in the first section. Secondly, the inclusion of the contextual material in particular seeks to facilitate the subsequent more detailed textual engagement with Smith's work, by providing some initial links to the contemporary practical questions with which the text is concerned. Central here is the problem of state debt, which was particularly pressing in the context of ongoing competition in the eighteenth century between the European colonial powers, and to which Smith's theoretical response gives a central place to land. Section two explores some of these issues whilst introducing the idea of Smith's "political œconomy" as a science of statecraft. As this indicates, the "scientific" character of his investigation rests largely on his employment of a historical approach. Section three thus introduces Smith's specific application of historical reasoning, in particular looking at the distinction recognized by his contemporaries between "natural" and "civil" histories. With this groundwork in place, the final section introduces three adjacent concepts – earth, property, and territory – which I suggest act as a useful hermeneutic device through which to identify key aspects of Smith's discussion of land, and which serve, successively, to structure the following three chapters.

## Smith's work and its reception

Adam Smith has long borne the epithet the “founder of modern economics”, an idea which has a long history in the reception of Smith's work almost ever since the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* (Tribe 1999). This is a notion that has continued to inform – in more or less strong variants – much of the literature within the history of economic thought.<sup>68</sup> In his earlier book on *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse* Keith Tribe suggested that the principal reason for the canonization of Smith in this way through the twentieth century is that parts of the work are “peculiarly susceptible to the imposition of a neo-classical grid” (Tribe 1978, 7). A closely related set of ideas certainly continues to dominate the popular reception of Smith, emphasizing his place as the “prophet of capitalism”<sup>69</sup> and a diehard “economic liberal”, who privileged above all else free markets, and laissez-faire government – a view supposedly encapsulated within his notion of “the invisible hand”.<sup>70</sup> As such, since the 1980s, Smith has come to be cited frequently by neoliberal policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic (Tribe 1999, 609), his name even being pressed into service to endorse market-based responses to environmental issues (Dale 2012).

All this would suggest that *The Wealth of Nations* continues to be a text fated to be cited far more frequently than it is read. This is significant for the present purposes because there is a need to avoid and, indeed, to counter some of the received wisdoms around the text. This is both for the sake of situating the present contribution in relation to prevailing understandings of Smith's book, but, more particularly, since the reception of this text has served to undermine acknowledgement of what I will suggest is the centrality of land in its theoretical construction and substantive arguments. The complexity of this reception, which has in itself generated a significant volume of commentary (e.g. Teichgraber 1987; De Berg and Salvat 2001; Lai 2003; Oslington 2012b), is

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Heilbroner (2000, ch.3). Schumpeter was famously ambivalent about Smith's intellectual contribution, seeing his work as largely a synthesis of ideas previously stated by other authors. Nevertheless, he still saw Smith's synthetic effort as a foundational moment for “economic analysis”.

<sup>69</sup> A brief web search is enough to reveal the continued pervasiveness of phrase (e.g. Rosenblum 2001; Hunziker 2012; Lidow 2018).

<sup>70</sup> In fact the phrase appears only once in *The Wealth of Nations*, also appearing once in Smith's earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and once in his *History of Astronomy*. On the inappropriateness of the popular interpretation of this phrase, see Vivienne Brown (1994). The interpretation of this phrase, and particularly its possible implicit Providentialism continues to be the topic of debate amongst Smith scholars (Harrison 2011; Oslington 2012a; Schwarze and Scott 2015).

beyond the scope of the present discussion. Nevertheless, in trying to account for prevailing views within the sprawling literatures that *The Wealth of Nations* and Smith's work in general have engendered, it is necessary briefly to pay attention to aspects of Smith's biography, and to a broad outline of some trends within the subsequent reception of his work.<sup>71</sup>

Born in Kirkcaldy in Scotland, in 1723, Smith's education took place first at Glasgow College (now Glasgow University), at the age of fourteen, and subsequently at Balliol College, Oxford, where he remained from 1740-6.<sup>72</sup> Though details of the content of this education are incomplete, he is known to have studied classical and modern (English, French, and Italian) literature, and philosophy. In Glasgow, he received tuition in moral philosophy by Francis Hutcheson, whose chair he would subsequently assume in 1752. In 1748, some time after his return to Scotland, he was invited by Lord Kames to give lectures on rhetoric and belles-lettres in Edinburgh, with this remit subsequently extending to include the history of philosophy and jurisprudence. It was during this period that Smith became personally acquainted with David Hume, whose *Treatise* Smith had read earlier during his time at Oxford. Assuming the chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow, Smith taught a curriculum inherited from Hutcheson, which included ethics, the rights and duties of man according to the law of nature and of nations, and politics. It was during this tenure that Smith published the first of his two books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), a work based on a part of the material that he was teaching during this period.

In 1763, Smith accepted an offer from Charles Townshend to accompany his stepson, the third Duke of Buccleuch, on his Grand Tour as a travelling tutor. The tour took them to Geneva, Toulouse, and Paris, before being cut short by the Duke's illness. It was the last of these destinations that was particularly significant for Smith's intellectual development, with him

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<sup>71</sup> For a sense of the scale of the literature on Smith, *A Selected Bibliography of Significant Works about Adam Smith* by Martha Bolar Lightwood (2016 [1984]) lists some 742 "significant" works published by 1982. Since there has been a resurgence of interest in Smith since the 1980s, including the publication of numerous works that have importantly added to understandings of Smith's work and its context, it can be assumed that a similar effort today would find a significantly larger number of "significant" works.

<sup>72</sup> Much of what is today known about Smith's biography is drawn from the memorial presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1793 by his successor at the University of Glasgow, Dugald Stewart. Stewart's *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith* (ALWS) is included in the collected Glasgow Edition of Smith's Work. The seminal work on Smith's biography is John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith* (1895). The authoritative modern reference is that of Ian Simpson Ross (2010). See also the more recent work of James Buchan (2007) and Nicholas Phillipson (2011).

becoming well acquainted with key figures associated with the physiocratic school, including Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, the marquis de Mirabeau, Pierre-Paul Lemercier de la Rivière, and Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. Indeed, his closeness to these circles was indicated by the fact that, when the Duke fell ill, it was to François Quesnay that Smith first turned as a physician (*Correspondence*.94, 114). On his return to Britain, Smith spent time in 1766-7 advising Townshend, who was now Chancellor of the Exchequer, in dealing with the financial consequences of the recent Seven Years War. In the years following this, Smith spent much of his time preparing his second major work, *The Wealth of Nations*, which was first published in 1776. The success of this work led Smith to be offered in 1778 a government sinecure as Commissioner for Customs in Edinburgh, a post which he accepted, carrying out these duties until his death in 1790.

During his last years, Smith oversaw several revised editions of his two books. A third book, however, on the “general principles of law and government”, which had been promised in the closing lines of the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS VII.iv.37, 342) was never to appear. In an “Advertisement” prefixed to the final edition of the book, Smith expressed that whilst some of this material had in fact already appeared in *The Wealth of Nations*, he was now likely too advanced in years to be able to execute his original plan in its fullest. The Advertisement explains that, although the latter work had dealt in some detail with matters of “police”, what remained missing, and would therefore have constituted the content of the planned work was a “theory of jurisprudence” (TMS Advertisement.2, 3). On Smith’s instruction, the significant volume of manuscript material he left was destroyed by the executors of his will. Whilst a volume of *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, comprised a collection of earlier material on subjects as diverse as the nature of the “imitative arts” and the history of astronomy, was published posthumously in 1795, anything written by Smith that might have formed part of his third projected work was therefore lost. This loss has since been partially mitigated by the subsequent discovery of two separate sets of student notes on Smith’s lectures on jurisprudence, during his tenure at Glasgow. Whilst these offer clues as to what some of content of the projected third book might have been, however, the layout and precise remit of this work remain unknown.

For understanding *The Wealth of Nations* today, however, as significant as the context of its composition is its subsequent reception. On its publication, the work quickly became a great

success, running to six editions within Smith's lifetime, and being reproduced in numerous subsequent editions, and many translations, influencing not only the political economists of the subsequent generation, but also figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Hegel, and Marx. Indeed the fame of this work largely eclipsed *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* throughout the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, leading to a neglect of the earlier work (Backhouse and Tribe 2018, 40).<sup>73</sup> As suggested above, the reception of *The Wealth of Nations* has not been straightforward. In part, at least, this is likely a function of the nature of the work itself. To modern readers, Smith's arguments can appear convoluted. The famous economist and historian of economic thought, Joseph Schumpeter, for example, complained of Smith's "almost innumerable disquisitions on particular points" (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 190). Indeed, even contemporaries advised Smith that the key arguments of the work were not easily comprehensible.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, as Lai (2003) has demonstrated, many foreign-language editions of the work were afflicted by issues of poor translation and censorship, and the work in general was known only in fragmentary form. Moreover, even where reliable editions have been available, interpretations of the work have been influenced variously by the political purposes of the interpreters, the disciplinization of academic knowledge, and prevailing trends within scholarship.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, a key question within Smith scholarship has been the so-called "Adam Smith problem". This "problem" was first put forward by members of the German Historical School of economics, and suggested that *The Wealth of Nations* demonstrated a fundamental methodological and philosophical break with *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to this reading, whereas the earlier work had demonstrated a much more clearly historicized method, Smith's economic analysis relied on a much more abstract form of reasoning (Montes 2003). Moreover, this shift was understood to reflect a move away from an approach reflective of the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment, towards one reflective of those of the French Enlightenment, implying that Smith's contact with the Physiocrats in the 1760s had marked a radical break in his thought, and a rejection of earlier ideas.<sup>75</sup> At stake here, in particular, was

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<sup>73</sup> The exception being in Germany, where *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* came to play a crucial role in a critique of Smith's second book, as discussed below.

<sup>74</sup> Hugo Blair, for example, advised Smith that a summary of the key arguments of the work would help clarify the main ideas for his readers (*Correspondence*.151, 189).

<sup>75</sup> A useful summary of the origins of this view is given in the editors' introduction to the Glasgow edition of *The*

Smith's account of the individual, and the question of whether *The Wealth of Nations* had abandoned the nuanced account of human motivations found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in favour of a more starkly materialist conception of individual self-interest found in Smith's account of market relations.<sup>76</sup>

Keith Tribe (2015, ch.5) has suggested that “modern” Smith scholarship only emerged at the start of twentieth century with the publication of Edwin Cannan's 1904 edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, which featured an extensive introduction and commentary. This modern Smith scholarship has overwhelmingly rejected the “two Smiths” thesis, in favour of an emphasis on the internal coherence of the author's thought throughout his career (Watson 2019). Key in evidencing this position was the publication by Cannan in 1896 of the first of the two sets of student notes on Smith's lectures on jurisprudence. These demonstrated that key aspects of Smith's approach within *The Wealth of Nations*, including his strong disposition for laissez-faire and free trade, were firmly in place in his thought prior to his time in France.

The trajectory of scholarship in recent decades has been significantly shaped by the publication in 1976 of the complete Glasgow edition of Smith's work.<sup>77</sup> This collection, timed to mark the bicentennial anniversary of the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, appears in six volumes, including both of Smith's published books, as well as all of the available lecture notes, and the extant correspondence, complete with comprehensive editorial introductions, and detailed added footnotes.<sup>78</sup> The publication inaugurated a new wave of Smith scholarship, which had previously been dominated by commentary on *The Wealth of Nations* from authors with a background in

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*Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Raphael and Macfie 2014 [1976], pp. 20–3). See also Leonidas Montes (2003).

<sup>76</sup> More recently, the stakes of the “Adam Smith problem” have undoubtedly been heightened by the perceived political implications of the question. Given Smith's popular fame as a herald of free-market ideology, much of the literature has been oriented towards demonstrating that Smith's seminal account of the market economy did not in fact propose that this could or should be imagined in terms of an arena of unadulterated selfishness and unfettered competition between individuals. One of the most explicit accounts in this respect is that of Iain McLean, who wants to interpret Smith in today's terms as a left-of-centre social democrat (2006, 120). It is perhaps for this reason that, in spite of a general consensus on the issue within Smith scholarship, scholars continue to feel the need to address the problem (e.g. Griswold 1999, 366; Fleischacker 2004, 48; Montes 2019).

<sup>77</sup> On the “renaissance” of interest in Smith upon the publication of the Glasgow edition of Smith's work, see (Recktenwald 1978).

<sup>78</sup> The discovery of additional student notes on jurisprudence, and on Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres have enlarged the corpus of work on which Smith scholarship can draw, and are included in the Glasgow edition of Smith's works.

economics. In particular, since the 1980s, there has been a turn towards reading Smith more broadly in relation to the history of political thought. Key here is the work of István Hont, who emphasized the importance of ideas of natural law and civic virtue in the Scottish Enlightenment (Hont and Ignatieff 1983; Hont 2010).

This post-Glasgow edition scholarship maintained the consensus that the “Adam Smith problem” of the nineteenth century has been firmly settled, and that there is an essential coherence to Smith’s thought as a whole (e.g. Winch 1978; Haakonssen 1981, 197). Such work has broadened understandings of Smith’s work and its context in broader currents of Enlightenment thought, and has been very useful in countering overly economic interpretations of *The Wealth of Nations*. However, as Matthew Watson (Watson 2019) has argued, this general emphasis on the fundamental coherence of Smith’s thought as a whole has led to the neglect of significant developments in his thought between the writing of his two major works.<sup>79</sup> Of importance here is his relation to the Physiocrats. Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Hont and Ignatieff 1983) do pay significant attention to Smith’s engagement with Anglo-French debates regarding regulation of the internal grain trade, in which the Physiocrats played a key role. Nevertheless, it is striking that so much of the more recent scholarship has sought to downplay this connection.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Given that Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence* were being given during his time at Glasgow, the period during which he also published, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the presence of important similarities between the *Lectures* and later *The Wealth of Nations*, has been taken to mean that the earlier book is built on the same economic foundations. However, Watson notes several points of divergence between the earlier lectures and Smith’s major work on political economy. Of these, three seem particularly significant additions in the later work: the development of a theory of capital; the idea of labour being set into motion by different kinds of expenditure; and the idea of “natural laws” of economic freedom. These will be discussed further below and in subsequent chapters.

<sup>80</sup> Fleischacker (2004), for example, certainly misrepresents the physiocratic connection by conflating Smith’s critiques of mercantilism and physiocracy (discussed here in the subsequent chapters). Gavin Kennedy makes only a small handful of references to the Physiocrats, in each case again to emphasize Smith’s distance from their ideas (2008). The collection by Leonidas Montes contains just two minor references (Montes and Schliesser 2006). Even *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith* edited by Knud Haakonssen contains only a single reference to any of the physiocrats, and this only states simply that Smith’s meeting them in France might have “stimulated Smith in the major work in which he was already engaged” (2006, 2). Donald Winch’s *Adam Smith’s Politics* mentions the physiocrats just in one passage, explicitly downplaying their influence on his thought (1978, pp. 130–1). Vivienne Brown makes only a single reference, in a footnote, to Physiocracy (Brown 1994, 154, n.24). Charles Griswold’s book, meanwhile, contains not one mention of physiocracy or any of the physiocrats (1999). Similarly, Haakonssen’s early single-authored text does not give a single mention to Physiocracy (1981). Of course, these books have divergent aims, and there is no necessary reason why any one of them specifically should have to deal with the physiocratic connection (although the near total omission in the *Cambridge Companion* is surprising). However, given that many of these are regarded as key interventions to the literature in recent decades, the extent to which the physiocratic aspect of Smith’s thought is neglected is striking, and indicative of a general trend to downplay this connection.

This neglect of Physiocracy is significant for the present purposes because of the important association between physiocratic thought and land already discussed briefly in Chapter One. Whilst it is absolutely not the case, as we will see in the following chapters, that Smith's views on land are derivative, it is true that the emphasis placed on land by the physiocrats seems to be an important influence. Although it is not possible to say definitively that there is a causal connection, it is striking that the neglect of the physiocrats is associated with a much more general neglect of the importance of land in Smith's work in the historicist scholarship.<sup>81</sup> A generous interpretation of this might suggest that the bulk of this literature has simply followed other lines of enquiry. In particular, a dominant trend within the post-1980 scholarship has been towards rehabilitating the moral philosophical dimension of Smith's work.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, it would seem that this valuable drive to position Smith's political economic thought as couched within a broader moral philosophical framework has simultaneously entailed an effort to downplay what are understood as the more materialist aspects of his work, leading land as a whole to be largely ignored.

By contrast, land does feature in commentaries by historians of economic thought. Indeed this is necessarily so, since the centrality of land within the text means that giving a theoretical account of Smith's political economic work that does not at least touch on land in some way would be quite difficult. Here, however, the trend towards reading older texts through the lens of subsequent economic thought – as discussed in Chapter Two – is clearly evident. Smith's emphasis on the priority of agriculture as a site of investment receives some coverage (e.g. Robbins 1998 [1979], ch.15). In general, however, it is how Smith conceived of rent as an analytical principle that is deemed important. Posing the question in this way, answers have tended to stress Smith's lack of clarity, particularly as contrasted with the theoretical debates of the early nineteenth century. Reading Smith in terms of these later debates has tended to cast him in a poor light. Robbins, for example, suggested that Smith's contradiction of Ricardo's later assertion that the interests of landowners are opposed to those of the rest of society constituted a mystery (Robbins 1998 [1979],

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<sup>81</sup> A couple of further exceptions are notable. Vivienne Brown (1994, ch.7) does have some more sustained commentary on land, but this does not go conceptually beyond standard accounts in the history of economic thought. Thomas Christopher Smout's contribution to Hont and Ignatieff's collection does deal with land in some detail, but this is from an economic history rather than a conceptual point of view, offering an account of the development of the Scottish economy by the later eighteenth century (1983).

<sup>82</sup> For more recent work with an explicit focus on Smith's moral philosophy, see Kennedy (2008). See also Tom Campbell (Campbell 2010 [1971]).



180), the implication being that this represented a failure of analysis on Smith's part.

In writing off rent so quickly within *The Wealth of Nations*, it is often overlooked that the passages that deal with land in detail are amongst the lengthiest within the work. Where this is noted, it is taken as further evidence of Smith's lack of critical acuity. Schumpeter, for example, notes the extraordinary length of chapter xi of book I, "Of the Rent of Land", remarking that this constitutes a whole 7.6% of the length of the entire five books of the work taken together (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 190). In his view, however, this simply indicates that Smith's thoughts on rent were "muddled" (*ibid.*, 191), and it is here in particular that he complains of the "innumerable disquisitions" on which Smith embarks. In attempting to boil down these arguments to their analytical essentials, Schumpeter claims that Smith wrongly arrived at the conclusion that the phenomenon of rent can be due only to a monopoly in land. The most generous praise he is able to offer is to suggest that "the so-called Ricardian theory of rent might have emerged from an effort to put logical order into the Smithian jumble" (*ibid.*, 191). Smith's comprehension of land, in this view, grasped only vainly towards the clarity of the kinds of highly abstract theoretical arguments about rent that characterized political economic thought in the early nineteenth century, and which were epitomized – as we will see in Chapter Seven – by the work of Ricardo

As a whole, therefore, in spite of the vast body of literature that deals with Smith's work, there is very little sustained commentary on the role of land in his writing either within the history of economic thought or the more historicist literature.<sup>83</sup> As discussed in the introduction, and in Chapter Two, the work of both Tribe (1978) and Mei (2017) on land and the history of economic thought is useful in its own right, though both in different ways tend to have repeated the tendency of historians of economics to reduce land to rent. Of the extant literature, the contribution that stands out is that of Fredrik Jonsson (Jonsson 2010, 2013). Jonsson's contextual historical work draws attention to the "ecological" dimension of Smith's thought, particularly by situating him in the context of the entwinement of political economic and natural historical investigation in

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<sup>83</sup> As was discussed in the introduction, there are a number of contributions which have added in various ways to understandings of land in the history of economic thought through discussions of the concepts of "nature" and "natural resources" (Bleischwitz 2001; Nadeau 2003; Schabas 2003, 2009; Erreygers 2017; Wolloch 2017). However, with the important exception of Margaret Schabas' work, much of this is lacking in detail, and moreover none of this literature is focussed on land directly.

contemporary Europe. In doing so, he draws attention, in a way not seen elsewhere in the literature, to some of the complexity around Smith's discussion of land use within *The Wealth of Nations*. This provides an excellent account of the natural historical dimension of Smith's thought, and influences the present investigation, particularly in Chapter Four. However, as useful as this account is for understanding broader concerns around land, it does not in itself constitute a conceptual study, nor does it provide a detailed account of the theoretical role of land within the construction of the text as a whole. In what follows in this chapter, I build towards an outline of what such an account might look like. First, however, I suggest it is necessary to look in more detail at two related meta-theoretical concerns within Smith's work, science and history, which are dealt with in the following two sections.

## **Political œconomy as a science of statecraft**

Outside of the specialist literature and broader contextual historical work, standard accounts of *The Wealth of Nations* build upon the idea that this is Smith's economic text. But this already tends to imply a fixed set of ideas about what designates a specifically "economic" domain of analysis, and what an economic theory might look like. In particular, broader academic understandings of the work (including much of the history of economic thought literature) draw more or less explicitly on the idea that Smith's work belongs to the lineage of "classical" political economy. As discussed in Chapter One, this is in itself a problematic label. Central to its usage, though, seems to be the idea that land is understood in this tradition as a "factor of production". This distinguishes "classical" political economy, in particular, from subsequent neoclassical economics in which only labour and capital are recognized as factors of production. Central to the claims of this thesis is the idea that what we find within *The Wealth of Nations* is something other than the conception of land as simply a factor of production. In particular, as also argued in Chapter One, the factor of production view implies that land is conceived certainly as a resource of strictly limited supply, but one that can be understood, for the purposes of analysis, narrowly in terms of the revenues that it yields. What I suggest we find within Smith's text is a far more expansive understanding of land, and in particular, one that takes seriously the analytical importance of land's materiality.

It is at this point of the thesis that it is necessary to start building the parameters of a reading that make such a claim possible. Since, I suggest, the framing of *The Wealth of Nations* as an “economic” text is potentially unhelpful, from this point, I choose to adhere to Smith’s own terminology of “political œconomy”. In doing so, I echo the distinction put forward by Tribe (1978) between the various discourses of “political œconomy” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the “political economy” that emerged in the early nineteenth century – particularly in the work of Ricardo. Of course, the shift in spelling is, in itself, an inconsequential development. Nevertheless, building on Foucault’s earlier argument within *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]), Tribe sees this shift towards the usage of “political economy” as marking the completion of a discursive break. As I suggested in Chapter Two, in endorsing the notion of a discursive break, my argument broadly follows those of Foucault and Tribe. The precise nature of my argument is somewhat different however, not least because of its primary focus on just two key authors – Smith and Ricardo. For Foucault and Tribe, Smith sits in the older of these discursive traditions,<sup>84</sup> though for both he is simultaneously something of a transitional figure. Whilst I do emphasize Smith’s debts to a number of contemporary and earlier traditions, the nature of my investigation precludes making claims about a broader discursive form that we might call “political œconomy”. However, in positing my own understanding of a discursive “break” in understandings of land between Smith and Ricardo, it seems helpful here to maintain the usage of the specific terms these authors used. If nothing else, this acts as a reminder of the potential pitfalls of using the conceptual terms of Ricardo’s “political economy” to interpret Smith’s “political œconomy”.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Rather than Tribe’s “political œconomy”, Foucault refers to this as the “analysis of wealth”, placing emphasis on the centrality of the wealth concept.

<sup>85</sup> On the longer usage of the term “political œconomy”, see Tribe (2015, ch.1). Monchrétien’s 1615 *Traicté de l’économie politique* is sometimes given as the first modern usage of the term, though Tribe cautions that this did not imply political œconomy in the eighteenth-century sense. As seen in Chapter Two, Tribe’s earlier work (1978), incorporated a range of discursive formations, including what he terms mercantilism, bullionism, political arithmetic, and Physiocracy under the broad heading of “political œconomy”. This is not a strategy that he repeats in his more recent work. Indeed, even what appears to be the immediate predecessor to *The Wealth of Nations*, Sir James Steuart’s *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Œconomy* –which Smith himself conspicuously ignores in his own work – can, Tribe suggests, be seen to operate on a very different basis to *The Wealth of Nations*. In referring to Smith’s “political œconomy”, therefore, I am not seeking to make claims about his relation to any of these other authors or fields of thought. The point here is a more specific one. Whilst I do make the claim that Ricardo’s work, particularly in the way it treats land, importantly provides a new conceptual basis for subsequent economic thought, I am not trying to make claims about Smith’s relation to a broader tradition of political œconomy, although more specific linkages to various thinkers and traditions are discussed.

Historians of economic thought have, for the most part, tended to focus on books I and II of *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>86</sup> These are undoubtedly the parts of the work where the discussion can appear closest to the theoretical concerns of more recent economics. Here we find, for example, Smith's discussions of value, of rent, profits, and wages, of capital, and of money and interest. All of these remain important for understanding land within the theoretical construction of the work. However, the structure of the text is such that the overarching arguments do not fully emerge until its latter stages, books IV and V in particular. Whilst there might be some merit in analysing the content of the earlier books on its own terms, this kind of partial reading gives a misleading view of the work as a whole, and undoubtedly contributes to the tendency towards narrow readings of the role of land within the text.

In particular, it is in books IV and V that the crucial role of the state is revealed. By this I do not simply mean what Smith held the role of the state to be within a system of market exchange. More fundamentally, I mean that it is here that the epistemic role of the state is revealed. At the start of book IV, he declares:

Political œconomy, considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator, proposes two distinct objects; first, to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and secondly, to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the publick services. It proposes to enrich both the people and the sovereign. (WN IV.intro.1-2, 428)

This definition has proved problematic for historians of economic thought, Mark Blaug, for example, finding it “in violent opposition to the whole tenor of *the Wealth of Nations*” (Blaug, quoted in Winch 1983, 501n). At least some of the more historicist literature, however, has found it necessary to take seriously this claim.<sup>87</sup> Donald Winch has deemed Smith's description of political œconomy as the “science of a legislator”, “an accurate statement of his intentions and achievements” (1978, 501).

Smith's definition of political œconomy is striking for a number of reasons. The centrality of the

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<sup>86</sup> Keith Tribe (1978, 7) suggests that this is because these parts of the work are “peculiarly susceptible to the imposition of a neo-classical grid”.

<sup>87</sup> See, especially, the book-length treatment of *The Science of a legislator* by Knud Haakonssen (1981).

state is one. Compared to later economics, which has preferred to present itself as a disinterested investigation of economic processes, Smith's discourse is explicitly addressed to the figure of the "statesman or legislator". The term "legislator" was used specifically by Smith in contradistinction to "politician". The latter is a character to whom Smith colourfully refers an "insidious and crafty animal", driven by short-term expediency, rather than allowing his decisions to be guided by "general principles which are always the same" (WN IV.ii.39, 468). As Winch emphasizes, the definition makes it clear that political œconomy was considered only as one *branch* of the art of legislation, the much more expansive remit of which can be seen to emerge through Smith's broader corpus of work, including *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1978, 502).<sup>88</sup> A second striking aspect of the definition is the emphasis Smith places on this particular branch of legislative matters as concerning "revenue or subsistence". Amongst historians of economic thought, it is certainly the former aspect that has garnered the greater (if not all of the) attention. However, the reading I develop over the coming three chapters foregrounds instead the importance of the relation between the two, and in the following section of this chapter, I explore the centrality of the question of subsistence to the analytical strategy employed by Smith.

A third striking aspect of this definition, however, and one that it is worth exploring briefly here is Smith's claim to be engaging in "science". As Chapter Two argued, understanding the emergence of an economic conception of land requires taking seriously such claims to a scientific form of investigation, and we can see from the above definition of political œconomy that Smith explicitly suggests that political œconomy should be understood in this way. Smith's views on science have themselves been the topic of considerable debate (see Berry 2006, pp. 119–122). This is not least because his extant works contain both pieces on *The History of Astronomy* and *The History of the Ancient Physics* – both printed in the posthumous *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (EPS) – demonstrating his formidable knowledge of both ancient and modern science. As the longer title

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<sup>88</sup> On the figure of the "legislator", see Haakonssen (1981, 97). Tribe (2015, 58), however, cautions that Smith's invocation of the legislator should not be understood in the same manner as that in the work of Steuart or the "mercantilists" who Smith critiques in book IV of *The Wealth of Nations*, emphasizing that Smith's is a system of "natural liberty" rather than one which supposes an active intervention by the statesman. Tribe's argument is that Smith opposes "economic government" in general. It is certainly the case that Smith strongly endorses *laissez-faire*, but the point can be over-stated. I suggest the epistemic importance of the figure of the legislator is crucial (see Chapter Six), and, as Winch suggests, the general principles of political œconomy are still clearly seen as important within a broader art of legislation.

of the latter piece indicates, the ancient physics is posed as an illustration of “the principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries”. This is significant to the extent that here, as elsewhere in his work, “philosophy” and “science” are treated as largely interchangeable. It is the *Astronomy*, however, that is generally understood as revealing the most about Smith’s understanding of science (e.g. Todd 2014 [1976]).

Striking to a modern reader in Smith’s account is the psychological grounding of his argument. It is the sentiments of “Wonder, Surprise, and Admiration” (*Astronomy* a.1, 33) that are seen to give motion to the progress of science. Ultimately, the aim of science is to bring harmony to the mind (e.g. *Astronomy* e.13, 61) by rendering the diverse phenomena of nature comprehensible through revealing the underlying principles that govern them. This is an exercise in revealing the causal “chains” that link events in order that the mind is not shocked by seemingly discontinuous appearances. Wonder, which arrests the mind, vanishes

[u]pon the clear discovery of a connecting chain of intermediate events... What obstructed the movement of the imagination is then removed. Who wonders at the machinery of the opera-house who has once been admitted behind the scenes?  
(*Astronomy*, c.9, 43)

The model is explicitly that of Newton, whose explanation for the movement of the heavens according to the principle of gravity constituted, for Smith, “the greatest and most admirable improvement that was ever made in philosophy” (*Astronomy* e.67, 97). Yet, Smith seems to hold off from suggesting that any theory can be true in an absolute sense. Even the revered “system of Sir Isaac Newton” is considered not as entirely beyond question, but rather is more simply one, “whose parts are all more strictly connected together, than those of any other philosophical hypothesis” (*Astronomy* e.76, 104).

Some caution should be exercised, both in extrapolating a “philosophy of science” (in a more modern sense) from the *Astronomy* (Berry 2006, 120), and in transplanting all of these views into his political œconomy. Nevertheless, what seems certain from the broader corpus of Smith’s work is that he regarded it as possible to bring the principles of science to the study of human affairs. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he invokes the notion of “science of human nature” (TMS, VII.iii.2.5, 319). He was not alone in the conviction that such a science might be undertaken, which he shared with other prominent figures of Enlightenment, including Charles Louis de

Secondat Montesquieu. Of his Scottish contemporaries, however, the idea is most famously associated with David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature* (2014 [1739–1740]). As Christopher Berry puts it, “Smith essentially shares Hume’s conviction that a “science of man”... is possible.” (Berry 2006, 135). There is no direct reference to this within *The Wealth of Nations*. However, the clear continuities between this work and the approach seen in his earlier *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, which have received much attention in the more historicist scholarship (especially Haakonssen 1981), makes it easy to read *The Wealth of Nations*, and indeed his work as a whole as part of an integrated “science of man”.

As will be explored in more detail in the next section, this science is irreducibly historical in its approach. In the *Lectures*, such a historical scientific approach is directed towards accounting for the development of human legal systems. *The Wealth of Nations* builds on this account, but its focus is instead, in particular, on providing a detailed account of the historical development of societal subsistence. It is on these foundations that the more recognizably “economic” content of the work is built. Much of the analytical work of the text is devoted towards accounting for the kinds of exchange relationships that constitute subsistence in the sort of contemporary market society that was emerging at the time that the work was written. As a science, therefore, following the model laid out by Smith in his *Astronomy*, Smith’s political œconomy can be seen as proposing to reveal the hidden connections between phenomena as apparently disparate as, for example, levels of population, rates of interest, and the improvement of land.

This analysis forms the kind of “general principles” upon which he suggests the judgement of the legislator to be based. In this sense, however, it is certainly not a wholly abstract or disinterested scientific investigation. In particular, I suggest that in seeking to understand land and its theoretical role within the construction of the work as a whole, it is helpful to pay attention to the particular questions Smith proposed to answer with such an investigation. Key here is the question of state financing. The writing of text took place in the immediate aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756-63), a conflict in which Britain and France had led opposing coalitions of European powers in a struggle that spread, via the colonies of these countries, across the world. Warfare amongst the European powers was of course far from uncommon in the eighteenth century, and the cost of this was a continual problem for the states involved. But the scale of the Seven Years War had

saddled both British and French states with unprecedented debts, causing significant fiscal problems for both. Assuming the role of Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1766, Smith's benefactor Townshend came to play an important role in the response to the steep rise in the debt of the British state. Letters reveals the detailed nature of the discussion of the debt between the pair, and Townshend's desire to extract a "real revenue" from the American colonies (*Correspondence*.302), desires that were eventually embodied in the "Townshend Acts", leading to disagreements with the British colonists in North America, and subsequent rebellion.<sup>89</sup>

The question of debt is barely mentioned in the first three books of the *The Wealth of Nations*, receiving its first real consideration only in IV.i, where Smith begins talking about the centrality of the problem of military funding to systems of political œconomy. But it is in book V that this is developed more fully. In this final book he expresses much more explicitly his concern at the increase of the British public debt over the course of the preceding century, emphasizing that by far the greatest part of this is a direct result of the state's military adventures, both in the form of direct inter-state conflicts, and the defence of colonies. Whilst the maintenance of this ever-bloating debt posed immediate practical problems for the British state, Smith also saw it as damaging to the wealth of the country in the long term. The work thus builds towards a final chapter ("Of publick Debts"), where it brings together all of the theoretical elements developed through the earlier chapters in order to address the question of how the state should deal with this issue of the debt.

Smith's diagnosis of the problem of the debt is based on his analysis of contemporary practices of financing developed by the British state. According to this, the urgent requirement of the state for money during the course of recent wars has made it willing to borrow money on terms highly advantageous to lenders (see WN V.iii.7, 910). In particular, the desperation of the state for ever greater funds had meant that annuities paid to individual lenders, which were originally offered only for a set number of years, were now offered in perpetuity. This system of "perpetual funding", Smith thought, combined with the freedom of an individual to resell this debt to another,

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<sup>89</sup> There is no evidence that Smith agreed with the American duties imposed by Townshend. Though the possibility of raising a revenue from North America is discussed by Smith within *The Wealth of Nations*, it is in fairly neutral terms, framed by the consideration that, by 1776, this looked an extremely unlikely prospect.



had made loaning money to the state a very attractive employment of personal wealth, particularly for the rich merchants of London. But the institution of this perpetual funding Smith terms a “ruinous expedient” (WN V.iii.41, 921) on the part of the state, bringing about a state of affairs in which the principal of this bloating debt was never paid down, whilst the state was obliged to impose ever more burdensome taxes, even in peacetime, in order to maintain its obligation to pay these perpetual annuities.

A central thread of Smith’s argument is his opposition to the “sophistry” of what he terms the “mercantile system” (WN V.iii.52, 927), which he sees as historically having dominated policymaking in Britain and across the states of Europe. This, he suggests, mistakes the gold and silver of money for real wealth, resulting in greatly skewed policy. In the case of the debt, such a system paints the payment of annuities by the state to its creditors as a matter of little concern, on the basis that these merchant creditors are its own citizens, and thus the quantity of wealth within the country as a whole is unaffected. In Smith’s words:

In the payment of the interest of the publick debt, it has been said, it is the right hand which pays the left. The money does not go out of the country. It is only a part of the revenue of one set of the inhabitants which is transferred to another; and the nation is not a farthing the poorer. (WN V.iii.52, 926-7)

In this view, as long as the money stayed within the country, there was no loss of wealth.

The exact nature of Smith’s intervention into the debate surrounding the debt is the product of an analysis developed through the preceding four books of the work, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters. But in broad terms, this consists in the reframing of the question in terms much closer to those provided by the Physiocrats – that is, in terms of a theory of capital and an associated analysis of a societal process of production. Wealth, in this view, no longer is seen to consist in the accumulation of gold and silver. Money is instead seen as only a means of circulation, and not a part of the “revenue of society” (WN II.ii.14, 289). Rather, Smith’s oft-cited definition of wealth states that this consists in “the annual produce of the land and labour of the country” (e.g. WN II.v.1, 360). Like the Physiocrats, Smith also places a great deal of emphasis on the role of land as the origin of this yearly cycle of production, and of the circulation of the product through the various orders of society. Much of the theoretical edifice of the work is therefore devoted to justifying this shift of focus, driving home the argument that, “[t]he land

constitutes by far the greatest, the most important, and the most durable part of the wealth of every extensive country” (WN 1.xi.m.9, 258).

Through this theoretical lens, the state debt becomes an important problem because it serves to divert a significant portion of the nation’s store of capital from *productive* uses – agriculture and other kinds of industry – towards *unproductive* ones – the financing of what Smith sees as profligate and destructive wars. The gains of the merchant lenders acting as creditors to the state are made at the expense of landlords and other owners of capital, land and capital stock being “the two original sources of all revenue both private and publick” (WN V.iii.53, 927). These instead are subject to the burdensome taxes necessary to finance the annuities paid by the state.

To transfer from the owners of those two great sources of revenue, land and capital stock, from the persons immediately interested in the good condition of every particular portion of land, and in the good management of every particular portion of capital stock, to another set of persons (the creditors of the publick, who have no such particular interest) the greater part of the revenue arising from either, must, in the long-run, occasion both the neglect of land, and the waste or removal of capital stock. (WN V.iii.56, 928).

In the long term, therefore, the result of this must be the decline of the annual produce of the land and labour – that is, of wealth. The neglect of land is of key concern for Smith not only because it is one of the two key constitutive components of wealth, but because Smith’s theory, like the Physiocrats, gives priority to agriculture above other forms of industry. Smith’s system thus seeks to reverse what he sees as a historic neglect of agriculture, above all, by reorienting state policy towards the incentivization of land improvement.

The question of state financing thus importantly influences the shape and limits of Smith’s theory. This is true both in the specific sense that the text directly addresses the particular fiscal problems of the British state at the time, and in the more general sense that the role, expenditure, and funding of government are deemed as crucial matters of political œconomy in general, and as such are the subject of extended consideration in book V. From this brief outline of the overarching arguments of the work, we can already get a sense of the centrality of land within the construction of the text. But, as crucial as the question of state funding is, the theoretical foundations of the text go much deeper. As suggested above, central to the “science” Smith puts forward is a historical account of societal subsistence. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, it is really by digging into this account that the complexity of Smith’s thought around land becomes evident. However,

Smith's employment of historical reasoning is distinctive and, given its importance to the arguments made in the following chapter, it requires some consideration in its own right. As a further preparatory step, therefore, the following section looks in greater detail at the contrasting uses of history within *The Wealth of Nations*.

## History: natural and civil

It is easy to detect the presence of historical argument in *The Wealth of Nations*. Large parts of the text are occupied by more or less detailed digressions on topics as diverse as, for example, the value of rare birds in Roman times, the role of the sovereign in nomadic societies, or the power struggles of European kings with their feudal lords. These are amongst the parts of the work that have generally been neglected, if not entirely ignored, by historians of economic thought; Schumpeter, for example, whilst acknowledging the existence of these passages, says simply that they would likely have “taxed the reader's patience” (Schumpeter 1994 [1954], 185). Even amongst more historicist scholars, Smith's historical reasoning is sometimes supposed to be more or less separable from his “economics”, Frank Palmeri, for example, suggesting that Smith's history is “inserted into a treatise on classical economics” (Palmeri 2016, 6). However, I suggest that the employment of history within the construction of the work as a whole is neither incidental, nor purely illustrative, but in fact the model of societal development Smith advances through this historical material is integral to the work's overall theoretical structure and conclusions. It is also of particular interest here, because so much of this material seems to turn, in one way or another, around land. Smith's arguments are long and often convoluted, however, and making sense of them requires us to understand exactly *how* Smith is deploying history within the text.

As was suggested in the previous section, history is an integral part of Smith's “science” of political economy. This is through the employment of what has been recognized by various commentators as a “natural historical” mode of reasoning (Skinner 1967; Bryson 1968; Wood 1990). Dugald Stewart was the first to point to this in his retrospective of Smith's life and work. Here, he referred to Smith's use of, “Theoretical or Conjectural History; an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of Natural History, as employed by Mr Hume” (EPS.48, 293), and

particularly in Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1976 [1757]). According to Stewart, this was essentially an approach to filling in gaps in knowledge.

Whence the astonishing fabric of the political union; the fundamental principles which are common to all governments; and the different forms which civilized society has assumed in different ages of the world? On most of these subjects very little information is to be expected from [recorded] history; for long before that stage of society when men begin to think of recording their transactions, many of the most important steps of their progress have been made. A few insulated facts may perhaps be collected from the casual observations of travellers, who have viewed the arrangements of rude nations; but nothing, it is evident, can be obtained in this way, which approaches to a regular and connected detail of human improvement. (EPS.45, 292-3)

In the absence of historical records pertaining to key aspects of the development of human societies, then, Smith's approach entailed the use of logical reasoning to find their probable causes.

A particularly important aspect of this approach is seen in Smith's approach to the development of laws, which was described by his supporter and colleague at the University of Glasgow John Millar as a "natural history of legal establishments" (Millar 2006 [1787]). Within Smith's surviving work, this is explored most fully in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, but Haakonssen's seminal study places the same set of concerns at the heart of *The Wealth of Nations*, suggesting that the "general principles" of the science of the legislator are, in fact, "those which are the subject of Smith's jurisprudence" (Haakonssen 1981, 97). J.G.A. Pocock described Smith's conjectural mode of history as one "in which events or past states of existence are explained by appealing to those propensities of "human nature" most likely to have operated in producing them" (Pocock 2006, 276). But it is not only "human nature" in a narrow sense that is of concern for Smith. Rather, as Berry points out, "[t]he lynchpin of this [conjectural] history is the relation between the principles of human nature and external circumstances" (Berry 2006, 127). This is a key point, since, as will become clearer through the following chapters, the search for the origins of laws and other institutions entailed paying detailed attention to the relationship between human societies and their environment.

The most famous expression of this conjectural historical approach, however, is in the more specific device of a "stadial history". This posits a series of theorized stages through which societies and their institutions are supposed to develop, in a universal model thought to operate across geographical and temporal contexts. Smith was far from alone in employing this kind of

device. As was noted in the first section of Chapter One, prior to the mid-eighteenth century, significant thinkers in the natural law tradition such as Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke had already made use of similar analytical strategies.<sup>90</sup> Stadal histories were also popular amongst French authors around the middle of the eighteenth century, including Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, François Quesnay, and Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. The device was also popular amongst Smith's Scottish contemporaries such as John Millar, Adam Ferguson, Hume, and William Robertson<sup>91</sup>, figures who, with Smith, are indeed often referred to as the "Scottish historical school". Palmeri (2016) has recently extended the canon of eighteenth century stadal historians, notably to encompass German authors including Kant. Yet he notes the specificity of the Franco-Scottish employment of the device, which was distinctive for its more explicitly sociological character, and for crystallizing around a clear four-stage model.<sup>92</sup>

Smith's own employment of this device placed great emphasis on societal subsistence. He focused in particular on the ways different societal types gathered resources, and the systems of distribution according to which these resources were shared in order to ensure societal reproduction. In the first stage, subsistence was derived by foraging the spontaneous, uncultivated products of the land, and from hunting and fishing. For hunter-gatherer societies of this kind, the institution of property in land did not exist, since these societies were based on shifting habitation (WN I.vi.1, 65). Smith noted that this allowed very little scope for a division of labour, and was prohibitive to any significant accumulation of possessions. This situation changed in the following stage of shepherding, or pasturage. Shepherd societies, Smith suggested, can support a great many more people on the same amount of "fertile territory" (WN IV.vii.c.100, 634) than can hunters. Compared to the precariousness of the subsistence of hunter societies, the more dependable system of shepherding allowed for much larger armies to be sustained (WN V.i.a.5, 692), and a form of property that could be transferred between generations, making regular government, for

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<sup>90</sup> For a recent account of this lineage, through discussions of property, see Garnsey (2007, ch.6). The link between Pufendorf and the Scottish thinkers has been emphasized recently by Saether (2017). Saether emphasizes the importance of Smith's teacher Francis Hutcheson as a popularizer of Pufendorf's work, providing a direct link to Smith.

<sup>91</sup> Iain McDaniel's *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish enlightenment* (2013) provides one of the most authoritative recent accounts of debates between these thinkers.

<sup>92</sup> The exact origins of the four-stage model have long been thought unclear (e.g. Meek 1971; Pocock 2006, 280). However, Thierry Pauchant (2017) has recently argued that Smith was in fact the likely originator of the four-stages theory, based on lecture notes that Pauchant supposed to have been written in 1749.

the first time, a necessity. Since habitation remained shifting, however, there was still here no property in land.

The third, agricultural, stage of society represents a key shift in this respect, signalling a new relationship between a society and the land it occupies. Agriculture implies fixed habitation, in turn implying both appropriation of land, and the possibility of a much greater accumulation of stock, which is no longer limited by the demand of portability that accompanies shifting habitation. Smith did not confuse this appropriation of land with anything like the modern, capitalistic conceptions of landlordism, which appear only in the fourth stage.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, agricultural society sees the instantiation of an important class division between landowners and non-landowners. Cultivation is assumed always to provide a greater quantity of subsistence than is necessary to support the labourer who works it (see, for example, WN I.xi.b.2, 162), and, from their surplus, cultivators are generally obliged to pay some form of rent (whether in services, goods, or money) to their landlords.<sup>94</sup> These rents support the expenses of the landlord, who is also frequently able to call on the service of husbandmen to provide military service as and when required (WN V.i.a.6, 692). “As soon as stock has accumulated in the hands of particular persons, some of them will naturally employ it in setting to work industrious people” (WN I.vi.5, 65), Smith suggests. The generation of a surplus through the activity of cultivation in agricultural society thus gives rise to a proliferation of industry, and the birth of towns as sites to work up the raw produce of the country into more refined goods.

It is certainly towards the fourth stage, however, that Smith directs most of his attention. Whereas earlier stadial histories had recognized only the preceding three stages, the Franco-Scottish debates of the later eighteenth century saw the theorization of a fourth stage – that of “commercial” society – and it is toward the development of an analytic of commercial society that the bulk of what is generally taken as Smith’s “economic” reasoning in the work is oriented. Commercial society, for Smith, is not the same as what he terms a “mercantile” society, the latter being one which, generally lacking good agricultural land, obtains its subsistence primarily by international

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<sup>93</sup> The detail of agricultural (i.e. feudal) land relations is dealt with in great detail by Smith and is discussed further in the following two chapters.

<sup>94</sup> The radically different conception of “rent” in English feudalism is discussed in detail in Tribe’s book, *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse* (Tribe 1978).

trade – the principal contemporary example being Holland (WN IV.iv.19, 670). Instead this fourth stage represents what we might more commonly today term a “market” society – that in which the primary mode of production and distribution is by monetized exchange. The shift from agricultural to commercial society is not simply about the presence of monetized exchange in itself, however, since – as Smith’s own detailed historical digressions on the regulation of money amply demonstrate – monetized exchange of goods was an important mechanism long prior to the birth of modern commercial societies. The key shift here is rather that from a feudal society structured around personal fealty to one in which all goods and services command a price.

This had important implications for the mode of subsistence. Feudal land tenure arrangements had hinged on a complex system of personal rights and obligations in which much production was for the direct subsistence of the individual user of the land, or for the landlord. Commercial society implied, at least in principle, a free contractual relation of landlords and land users in which the produce of the land was sold in the market. Smith’s analysis of the relations around agricultural production is long and involved, and will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters. However, a key effect, he believed, of the marketization of agricultural production was to allow for a much finer division across all forms of labour, giving a great boost to industry in general, including manufacturing and foreign trade, and reinforcing a positive cycle of societal accumulation. This trend toward accumulation was all the more powerful for the fact that the incentive to accumulate was shared amongst a much broader constituency of individuals – not only the sovereigns and nobles as in previous eras – which in turn provided a greatly increased scope for the raising of taxes, when necessary, by the state.

The details of this stadial history, and particularly its relation to land, will become clearer through the following chapters. However, for now, it is useful to note several features. The device importantly structures the argument of *The Wealth of Nations* in a number of ways. Firstly, it argues for the recognition of the historical specificity of contemporary “commercial society” – the form of society Smith sees as emerging in the rich countries at the time he is writing – based on the specificity of its internal dynamics in comparison to societies based around other modes of subsistence. In making this argument, Smith aims to clear space for his radical rejection of the rationale of what he terms the “mercantile system” (the origin the term mercantilism in our

modern vocabulary) that he sees as dominating contemporary policy-making, on the basis that it ignores the fundamental link between a society's wealth and its subsistence. Secondly, the device thus fitted in neatly to what István Hont (1983) termed the "rich country, poor country" debate that was current within contemporary Scottish political economy. This sought to account for both the relative wealth and the relative rates of growth of that wealth within contemporary societies. In Smith's account, the relation between the wealth of Britain and France in particular is significant. But perhaps of even greater importance is the relation of Britain and other rich European countries to their colonial territories. The native population of North America, for example, is frequently referred to as tribes of hunters.<sup>95</sup> The pre-eminence of the colonial question, however, provides some challenges for the stadial historical model, hingeing as this does on the idea of a development driven by factors that are purely internal to a given society – challenges that Smith in fact does not directly address.

The third, and perhaps most complex of the functions of stadial history in the work is to provide the springboard for an argument about the "natural" course of societal development from the point of view of the theory of capital (explored further in Chapter Four). Here there is a kind of subsidiary stadial progression of societies which Smith terms the "natural progress of opulence" (see *WN* III.i). The idea is that, once a society has begun to accumulate capital, there is a natural order to the successive employments to which this capital is put within the society. This is supposed to start with the procurement of the raw produce of the land (including, most importantly, agriculture), before moving into manufacturing, the carrying trade, and the marketing of goods (see also *WN* II.v). Whilst Smith never explicitly links stadiality of the employments of capital and the broader stadial historical thesis outlined above, the synergy between the two is seen most obviously in Smith's extended reflections on the relation between town and country (found particularly in I.x and xi; III.i, ii, and iv; and IV.v and ix), which are explored further in Chapter Five. This draws together both the idea of a progression from an "agricultural" to a "commercial" society, and the idea that capital is "naturally" first applied in agriculture before expanding into manufacturing and trade. In doing so, Smith grounds his key (and highly Physiocratic) argument

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<sup>95</sup> (e.g. *WN* IV.vii.c.100, 634) In adopting this designation Smith implicitly repeats the problematic argument that the indigenous population of North America did not have agriculture, an argument most famously associated with Locke, in whose writing it provided a justification for the dispossession of lands by the colonists.



about the priority of the raw produce of land in the formation of wealth.

As we will see in the following chapters, this stadial history is integral to the construction of *The Wealth of Nations* as a whole. But, as Stewart's comments above indicate, such a conjectural approach can be distinguished from a more conventional narrative form of history. Smith's work is in fact littered with examples of both kinds of reasoning, and indeed the two approaches often appear to be mutually supportive. Narrative history at once provides the basis for a theorization of societal stages, and at the same time acts as a kind of empirical yardstick against which the more theoretical stadial argument can be assessed. This inter-relation of distinct modes of historical thinking has been noted by Pocock, who suggests using the contemporary term "civil history" to refer to this more conventional form of historical enquiry:

"Civil history" is the art of presenting the contingent in narrative form. "Conjectural history" operates when it is absent, assists in explaining it when it is operative, but in no case replaces or even controls it. An important reason for this is that in "civil history," or in "history" for short, things happen which are aberrant, deviant, and even inexplicable by the operations of nature alone. (Pocock 2006, 276)

Whilst civil history can support conjectural history, therefore, it simultaneously serves to indicate the deviation of actual events from what Smith takes to be their "natural" course.

With this in mind, it is striking that probably the most concentrated site of civil history in the work (WN III.2-4) is devoted precisely to an argument that would seem to refute what I termed the "subsidiary" stadial thesis concerning the order of employments of capital. Having established the theoretical principal that there is a natural order to the accumulation and application of capitals within a society, Smith then spends three chapters explaining in detail why and how the modern states of Europe did *not* follow this natural path of development, instead progressing in an "unnatural and retrograde order" (WN III.i.9, 380). Smith's reflections on the civil history of Europe therefore sit in a complex relation with the stadial thesis. On the one hand, it is clear that a large part of the imagined transition from "agricultural" to "commercial" societal stages is modelled on the European transition away from feudal societies, and the development of the legal-institutional structures of modern states – something Smith wants to present as a natural, and indeed desirable development. On the other hand, however, he also wants to argue that this same process has seen a perversion of the natural course of societal development, by promoting an

“unnatural” order of capital accumulation.

Two further employments of civil history are notable. The first is in the extensive discussion of colonies. By far the densest site for this strand of reflection is in the long chapter specifically dedicated to the topic in book IV (WN IV.vii). Here, Smith discusses the reasons for the establishment of colonies – which he argues were essentially the same in the case of ancient Greece and Rome as they have been for the modern states of Europe – as well as considerations such as the history of colonial trade policy, and the influence on European societies of goods from the colonies. The final use of civil history is found in the extensive use of records of historical prices that Smith makes to support various aspects of his argument. These are particularly important in the discussion of value, both in reference to Smith’s theory of value, and how this fits with his overall policy recommendations. Examples here therefore draw both on discussions of value in ancient (particularly Roman) writings, as well as use of more recent records to construct the movement of prices over recent centuries. Again, in both of these instances, the employment of civil history here serves to prepare one of the overarching arguments of the work concerning the failures of recent state policy, particularly in relation to the contemporary problem of Britain’s North American colonies.

## **Earth, property, and territory as a way of reading land in *The Wealth of Nations***

The profusion of the discussion around land is clearly apparent when reading *The Wealth of Nations*. But Smith himself provides no meta-theoretical commentary on how his particular concept of land is formed. On the contrary, the highly synthetic quality of his approach tends to obscure the analytical moves he is making, instead emphasizing the theoretical unity of his avowedly scientific approach to political economy. As such, it is not immediately obvious how an account of the role of land in the text should be structured. Appeals to Smith’s relationship to other bodies of thought, both those that he draws on and those that he has been seen to anticipate can be useful. But they do not in themselves provide a way of accounting thoroughly for the theoretical synthesis Smith attempts, and the resultant centrality of land in the text as a whole. Furthermore, the organizing

categories provided by standard accounts in the history of economic thought literature – in which land is primarily associated with rent – provide only very limited help in understanding the broader role of land in the theoretical construction of Smith’s work.

Given the aims of the thesis as a whole, and my framing in the thesis introduction of the research in terms of an apparent tension between economy and ecology, it is worth stressing that I avoid the temptation to structure a reading of the text based around identifying the “economic” and “ecological” concerns associated with land. Doing so, I suggest, risks imposing an anachronistic view of the separation of these domains. My suggestion is, in fact, that these do not represent clearly delimited domains for Smith. Thus, as organizing themes, “economy” and “ecology” can tell us little about how a theoretical understanding of land is developed within the text. Whilst I make reference to specific aspects that are of ecological interest, such as Smith’s discussions of soil fertility and progressive land use change, the argument here is of a different nature. I regard it as necessary to assess the concept of land found within *The Wealth of Nations* in its own terms – that is, on the conceptual ground on which Smith is operating – and only subsequently to make an assessment of what this tells us more broadly about the history of economic thought and the place of land within this body of knowledge.

Since land is the central object of this investigation, my reading of *The Wealth of Nations* can naturally be expected to emphasize those passages and aspects of the text that reveal the most about land. But in conducting an investigation of the role of land within the text, I simultaneously want to make a bolder claim that land, contrary to conventional readings, should in fact be regarded as central to the theoretical construction of the work as a whole. It is this, in particular, that justifies spending the following three chapters on a single concept within a single text. As we will see, understanding the central role of land within the text requires us to look at the intimate relation between land and many of the other key concepts within the work. Thus, this reading does not *only* reveal something about the concept of land within the text. It simultaneously offers a reinterpretation of this key canonical work as a whole, placing land at the very heart of its analysis.

As suggested in Chapter Two, I adopt a multi-faceted history of thought approach which is broadly genealogical, but which makes use both of more conventional forms of textual analysis and

contextual methods. In the following chapters, the contextual aspect of this approach is visible in two main ways. Firstly, this is seen in the way in which my reading of the text draws on Smith's broader corpus of work (such as it survives today). Although the central interest remains in the concept of land within *The Wealth of Nations*, rather than Smith's work as a whole, I suggest that, in certain instances, taking adopting a broader perspective on Smith's work helps us to bring out conceptual links and distinctions that are implicit but not fully elaborated within the text, and thus might be easily overlooked.<sup>96</sup> Secondly, contextual aspects of the discussion are visible in the situation of Smith's work in relation to the longer intellectual lineages on which he draws, as well as the discussion of the relation of Smith's work to a broader set of debates amongst contemporary authors. Here, I am able to draw on the now significant contextualist literature that deals with Smith and his contemporaries. But, in contrast to much of this work, my concern is not primarily for authorial intentions. Rather, drawing on Foucault's work, I adopt a more discursive focus, paying attention land's place within the conceptual configuration of the text.

This discursive orientation is key to the nature of the overall arguments put forward by the thesis as a whole, and which will be developed through the next chapters. One of the central claims is that Smith's concept of land is decisively not that which forms the basis of subsequent economic thought, and which, as we will see in Chapter Seven, is born in the work of David Ricardo. Whilst avowedly following Smith, Ricardo's work, in this respect, can thus in fact be seen to constitute a "break" with Smith's. As was suggested in Chapter Two, the notion of a discursive or epistemological break is one particularly associated with the "archaeological" period of Foucault's work (1972 [1969], 2002 [1966]), and is grounded in a particular tradition in the history and philosophy of science. My reference to a "break" here draws both on Foucault's own archaeological work, and on the subsequent development of this in relation to the history of economic thought by Keith Tribe (1978), both of whom see Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* as marking a break with earlier discourses. My approach, however, cannot be termed "archaeological", however, not least because this implies looking across discursive traditions as a whole, whereas my study focusses on identifying a crucial discursive shift between just two texts,

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<sup>96</sup> Of course, doing so raises potential problems in imputing a consistency to Smith's work as a whole of the kind that, as we saw above, have been controversial in the history of Smith scholarship. Where necessary, however, care is taken to avoid making claims that imply a consistency to Smith's work that might be contested by the textual evidence.

doing so in greater detail. Moreover, it departs from both Tribe and Foucault in its substantive content.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, whilst I am not able to adjudicate the broader claims made by Foucault and Tribe, my argument supports and draws on their reading of the emergence of the discursive tradition of “political economy” in the work of Ricardo, and the contention that this constitutes a discursive break. Whilst not directly an archaeological study, therefore, I still retain a primary concern for the conceptual configurations that constitute a particular theoretical structure, and thus give rise to a particular conception of land. As I further suggested in Chapter Two, however, my work is also influenced by the work of Stuart Elden on territory. Elden’s approach makes use of Foucault’s notion of genealogy, but highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between territory as word, concept, and practice. This same strategy is helpful for thinking about land. In what follows, I pay attention to all three of these facets, looking at cognate terms, as well as the diversity of practices with which Smith’s work engages, and which help give shape to his conception of land.

This methodological approach influences not only the reading of the Smith’s work within each of the following chapters, but also the overarching schema that structures the relationship of the three chapters. This schema proposes that land within *The Wealth of Nations* can best be understood by looking at a triad of immediately adjacent concepts – earth, property, and territory. These, I suggest, constitute three distinct yet inter-related “registers” in which we can understand Smith’s discussion of land to be conducted. It is worth emphasizing that this is a heuristic device I have chosen to impose on the text. Smith himself does not identify this triad of concepts as holding any special theoretical significance, either in general, or in relation to land. Nevertheless, the choice of this schema is far from arbitrary. I suggest that earth, property, and territory each represent distinct ways of thinking about the nature of land. Whilst these can often be seen to operate

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<sup>97</sup> As we saw in Chapter Two, the argument of Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]) focusses on the similarities in formal structure between different discursive formations at three stages over the course of Western thought since the renaissance, and pays very little attention to land. Tribe’s *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* instead develops the same argument, but uses it to substantiate the more specific claim that “political economy” as a discursive form can be seen to emerge only in the early nineteenth century. Of the two, therefore, Tribe’s is much closer to the substantive interest of my own investigation. However, as will become clear in the following chapters, my reading of *The Wealth of Nations* in particular diverges significantly from Tribe’s account.

simultaneously within the text, I suggest that distinguishing between these three registers helps us to elucidate key aspects of the discussion around land within the work that otherwise would be far more difficult to identify.

But this threefold schema is also key to developing a more specific argument which forms one of the central claims of the thesis: that land within *The Wealth of Nations* is conceived first and foremost in material terms. I suggest that the “earth” register is fundamental in this respect. It is here that we can see Smith foregrounding the materiality of human subsistence, and a natural historical conception of the shifting relationships between human societies and the earth. Contrary to conventional readings which focus narrowly on Smith’s account of market exchange, my reading shows the extent to which this account is couched within a much broader conception of human subsistence in general. I suggest that market exchange, therefore, is only a subset of a broader sphere of “material exchange”<sup>98</sup> which is theorized within the text, and which conceives of subsistence in terms of an exchange of materials both between individuals, and between humans and the earth itself.

Property, whilst representing a distinct register through which land can be understood, is nevertheless a consideration that Smith shows to be absolutely continuous with the concerns foregrounded within the earth register. This is because Smith understands the function of property precisely as mediating the relationship between humans and the earth. But whilst property mediates exchanges at the level of the individual, a further level of mediation is seen at the level of the state, in the form of territory. Importantly, Smith’s work makes visible the role of a diversity of practices relating to these registers. As such, property and territory appear not as reified categories, but as comprising contingent sets of practices in their own right. The practices with which Smith engages in the text are of a heterogeneous nature, being variously legal, technical, and administrative. But taken together, these can be seen to provide the conceptual parameters through which land is understood in the text.

As suggested above, the emphasis placed on practice within the reading presented in the following

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<sup>98</sup> In adopting the term “material exchange”, I am borrowing from from John Bellamy Foster’s work on *Marx’s Ecology* (Foster 2000, 157), which I will return to in the Conclusions.

three chapters is part of a methodological choice, deriving from a concern to understand the conceptual parameters of land. Yet it is worth noting that adopting this approach simultaneously highlights the extent to which Smith himself is unusually self-conscious and explicit about the practices with which he is engaging. This is seen, for example, in his reliance on legal categories to understand the process of production in modern commercial societies, but also in his engagement with various epistemological practices undertaken by the state. Crucial to the argument made here, however, is that, in relating the key conceptual categories with which he engages to concrete practices, Smith shows clearly the extent to which processes of production and exchange are conceived in resolutely material terms. In what follows, therefore, I demonstrate that the materiality of these processes is indeed visible in all three of Smith's registers, and it is in this way that land within *The Wealth of Nations* emerges as an eminently material concern.

## 4 – Adam Smith II: Land in the register of earth

The parentage of Plutus' Wealth is no secret. He is the child of Earth by Labour... He has Earth for his mother,... Labour for his Father, and Adam Smith for his head Genealogist. (Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Long 1979, 241)

### Introduction

This chapter introduces the first of the three registers in which I suggest Smith speaks of land – that of “earth”. The choice of this term requires some explanation. The English word “earth” (related to the German *erde*) has a number of connotations. It can refer to the soil, which in turn might be conceived as a solid stratum or substance, as that which can be cultivated, or as the ground on which other things stand. With fire, air, and water, it is one of the four classical elements. It can also refer to the world as a whole, both as an orb or planet, and – particularly as contrasted with “heaven” – as the dwelling place of humans. As I will show in the first section of this chapter, all these connotations are visible at different points in Smith’s work. Indeed, it is fair to say that earth, though not specially identified as such, seems to be a recurrent theme in Smith’s work.

Some of these connotations of the word earth do come close to particular meanings of “land”, but in general, in modern usage, the two terms are distinct. It is worth noting that this distinction is not so clear in derivatives of the Latin *terra*. In French, for example, *la terre* encompasses senses of a plot of land, land as a country (as in a distant land), and of (dry) land as opposed to the sea. But it can also be used to refer to many of the meanings of “earth” identified here. Since British political economy, both in the time of Smith and that of David Ricardo, was engaged in debates with French authors – the Physiocrats, in particular, being an important influence for Smith – the divergence of these terms is worth bearing in mind. In fact, the argument of the thesis as a whole will suggest that, whilst Ricardo’s political economy is founded on a much narrower conception



of land solely as a “factor of production”, Smith’s comments on land can be seen to maintain a far broader range of conceptual connections, within which the concept of land as a part or facet of the earth is key.

In the final section of the previous chapter, I suggested that it is helpful to think of earth, property, and territory as adjacent concepts to land. In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between land and earth, looking both at Smith’s use of these words, and at the conceptual overlap within this usage. In doing so, it shows that Smith’s concept of land is irreducibly connected to his understanding of human existence on the earth more broadly. The chapter highlights several ways in which this is visible. It demonstrates the detailed attention Smith pays to the practical resource-gathering relationships that constitute human subsistence. This is not limited to the production of goods as commodities, but sees Smith also investigating the ways in which the “spontaneous productions of the earth” play a part in subsistence. Agriculture is, of course, a key concern and through this we see the attention Smith pays to issues of soil fertility, as well as the alterations to the surface of the earth brought about by humans through deforestation, ecological exchange, and progressive land use change.

In spite of what I suggest is their importance within Smith’s work, these are aspects that have to date received little attention within the various strands of scholarship on Smith. As was suggested in the first section of Chapter Three, historians of economic thought seem to have largely ignored Smith’s extensive commentary on land, and, where this is considered, it is discussed almost exclusively in the terms provided by subsequent economics. Even Keith Tribe’s more careful conceptual work in *Land, labour and economic discourse* (1978) entirely overlooks these aspects. This has been only partially, and rather inadequately, redressed by recent efforts to narrate the history of economics in terms of its development towards the various environmentally concerned subdisciplines of modern economic thought (e.g. Kula 1998; Gómez-Baggethun *et al.* 2010; Erreygers 2017; Wolloch 2017). Until recently, this neglect was paralleled also in the more historicist literature. The seminal contributions of Donald Winch (1978) and István Hont (see also Hont and Ignatieff 1983; 2010), for example, deal, respectively, with issues surrounding the politics of land reform and free trade in grain markets, but any sense of the transformation of the earth through land use practices is overlooked.

It was argued in the third section of Chapter Three that Smith's science of political œconomy could be understood as comprising a natural (as well as a "civil") history of man. The presence of a natural history of societal institutions grounded in an account of human nature has long been noted in Smith scholarship (e.g. Skinner 1967; Bryson 1968; Wood 1990). The focus here, however, has been almost exclusively on the natural history of "man" in a narrower sense, rather than on the relation of human institutions to environmental conditions which, as we will see here and in the coming chapters, is an important aspect of Smith's thought. Yet, in this chapter, I will also suggest the importance of another, quite distinct tradition of natural history, one which runs from Pliny to contemporaries of Smith such as the Comte de Buffon, and Karl Linnaeus, and which is concerned in particular with the description of forms of plant and animal life, and minerology. These are connections that have been illuminated by more recent scholarship, and, in particular, the work of Margaret Schabas (see also Schabas and De Marchi 2003; 2009) and Frederik Jonsson (2010, 2013). Though the label is imperfect, I use here the much more modern term "geobiological" to disambiguate this latter tradition of natural history from what we might the "sociological" natural history of Smith's conjectural method.

Whilst this scholarship has been extremely useful in highlighting these important intellectual historical connections, the concern here is primarily discursive. In fact, Smith's deployment of natural historical reasoning within *The Wealth of Nations* is almost entirely implicit, and certainly makes no distinction between these traditions. Rather, on the contrary, Smith's synthetic approach perhaps deliberately suggests a seamless continuity between the fields of investigation covered by these social and geobiological forms of natural history. Bringing this understanding to bear on the text, I focus in particular on how Smith conceives of political œconomy in highly material terms, as a set of physical processes set into motion by the basic necessities of subsistence that follow from human existence on the earth. This is a crucial point, since, as we have seen in Chapter One, and as will be investigated in greater detail in Chapter Seven, economic thought following Ricardo has rejected thinking in terms of the physicality of economic processes, instead thinking purely in terms of monetary values. In what follows here, therefore, I focus on those comments of Smith that demonstrate the importance to his reasoning of this physicality, and the centrality he gives to land as the basis of the subsistence and development of societies.

Whilst paying close attention to the specific language Smith adopts, I have nevertheless found it necessary to extrapolate from Smith's own vocabulary in order to highlight one particularly salient point. In order to think about the physicality of the processes Smith describes, I have found it useful to draw on the notion of a "material exchange" that John Bellamy Foster has argued is central to the thought of Karl Marx (Foster 2000, 157).<sup>99</sup> In doing so, I am not immediately trying to draw parallels with Marx's work, though the continuities between the two are discussed again in the Conclusions of the thesis. For the purposes of the overall thesis arguments, however, this added terminology helps to draw attention to how the account of market exchange, for which the work is famously remembered, is not the starting point of Smith's analysis. Rather, this builds on a much broader – and conceptually prior – account of human subsistence, which conceives this in terms of a set of material exchanges: both those between humans, and, indeed, between humans and the earth itself.<sup>100</sup>

In what follows, the first of three sections looks at how Smith uses earth both as a word and concept in his broader corpus of work, and simultaneously investigates connections to the work and practice of Linnaeus and his followers. The second section engages more directly with the theoretical structure of *The Wealth of Nations*, suggesting that this is founded, at its most basic level, in an account of the relation between human labour and the earth. The third section looks at how this account is developed to think about questions of soil fertility and land use change.

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<sup>99</sup> In fact, Foster translates Marx's term *Stoffwechsel* as "metabolism". However, this term, hinging as it does on the concept of energy (Fischer-Kowalski 1998), which is an innovation of the nineteenth century (see also Mirowski 1989), has a more specific connotation, and is therefore best avoided for the present purposes. As Foster demonstrates, in Marx's case, this term was used in the context of his engagement in the nascent ecological debates of the 1860s and 70s. Whilst, in Smith's case, his concern cannot be said to be "ecological" in this strict sense, he is nevertheless engaging with problems of soil fertility, fertilization, and the physical exchange of materials between town and country that would inform the emergence of the discipline of ecology during the time Marx was writing.

<sup>100</sup> As will also be discussed in the Conclusions of the thesis, in applying the concept of "material exchange" to Smith's work, I simultaneously contest Foster's own interpretation of Smith. In one of the few pieces of literature that directly engages with the concept of "earth" in economic thought, Foster (2007) suggests that Smith can be seen straightforwardly as an exponent of "classical political economy". In doing so, he conflates Smith's views in particular with those of Ricardo in order to contrast this "classical" view to the supposedly more nuanced and complex conception of earth to be found within the writings of Marx and Engels. This is a reading, of course, that this thesis explicitly rejects, demonstrating that Smith had a very different understanding of land to Ricardo.

## Natural history and the improvement of the earth

The earth register is that which I suggest Smith uses when, in talking of land, he invokes the history of human subsistence, and particularly the history of this subsistence understood as the “improvement” of the earth. But in order to understand earth as a register in which Smith talks about land, we must also look at earth as a concept in its own right. Before turning to *The Wealth of Nations* in the subsequent sections, therefore, I look here at the understanding of earth in the broader corpus of Smith’s work. As we saw in the introduction, the word earth – as contrasted to “heaven” can imply a specifically human domain. But as ground and soil it can imply the physical solidity of the earth, the planet as a whole, and the home and basis of life in general. In this sense, what I have identified as distinct fields of “sociological” and “geobiological” natural history converge in earth as their common object of study. In what follows it is the latter with which I am particularly concerned.

Evidence of Smith’s concern for natural history in the geobiological sense is seen throughout his career. His letter to the editors of the *Edinburgh Review* of 1755, for example, reviews, alongside Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, the work of the French naturalists Comte de Buffon and René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (EPS, 248-9), Smith’s comments implying that he read these in some detail. His library is also known to have contained both ancient works of natural history, such as Pliny’s *Naturalis historiae*, as well as more contemporary works such as Linnaeus’s *Systema naturae* (1735), Benjamin Stillingfleet’s introduction to the Linnaean system (1759), Pierre Poivre’s *Voyage d’un philosophe* (1768), and Pehr Kalm’s *Travels into North America* (1770-1771). Smith is also known to have been friends or associates with various figures with strong interests in natural history and improvement, including the geologist James Hutton, the judge Henry Home, the chemist Joseph Black, and the physician William Cullen. Jonsson notes that the work of these individuals formed part of the rich culture of Scottish improvement in the late eighteenth century (Jonsson 2010, 1350). Nor was Smith unfamiliar with the practical context of improvement. As tutor to the Duke of Buccleuch, one of Smith’s duties was to advise on the management of the Duke’s extensive estate in Scotland (Bonnyman 2014).

Smith’s moral philosophical text, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, does make occasional reference to

earth. The most significant of these, for the present purposes, is a passage in which Smith discusses the motivations that drive humans to improve the earth. It is, ultimately, mankind's natural desire for wealth, he suggests,

which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth. The earth by these labours of mankind has been obliged to redouble her natural fertility, and to maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants. (TMS II.i.10, 183-4)<sup>101</sup>

This is indicative, since it hints at an understanding of the development of societies in terms of the progressive modification of the earth, an understanding that I suggest is visible in a much more developed form within *The Wealth of Nations*.

Even here, therefore, in Smith's moral philosophy, there are indications that this investigation is conceived as continuous with a natural historical conception of human existence. Elsewhere in the text, there are further signs of Smith's interest in natural history. In his explanation of efficient and final causes, for example, he uses the example of bodily processes.

[I]n the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species... The digestion of the food, the circulation of the blood, and the secretion of the several juices which are drawn from it, are operations all of them necessary for the great purposes of animal life. Yet we never endeavour to account for them from those purposes as from their efficient causes, nor imagine that the blood circulates, or that the food digests of its own accord, and with a view or intention to the purposes of circulation or digestion. (TMS II.ii.3.5, 87)

The "œconomy of nature" is seen as operating in the same manner with respect to man, as in the case of plants and other animals:

Self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which Nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals. Mankind are endowed with a desire of those ends, and an aversion to the contrary; with a love of life, and a dread of dissolution; with a desire of the continuance and perpetuity of the species, and with an aversion to the thoughts of its intire extinction. But though we are in this manner endowed with a very strong desire of those ends, it has not been intrusted to the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason, to find out the proper means of bringing

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<sup>101</sup> The editors of the Glasgow edition of the *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* note that Smith's choice of wording here parallels his translation of Rousseau in his letter to the authors of the *Edinburgh Review*, mentioned above. This reads, "and the vast forrests of nature were changed into agreeable plains" (EPS, 252); in Rousseau's original words: "les vastes forêts se changèrent en des campagnes riantes" (EPS, 255).

them about. Nature has directed us to the greater part of these by original and immediate instincts. Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure, and the dread of pain, prompt us to apply those means for their own sakes, and without any consideration of their tendency to those beneficent ends which the great Director of nature intended to produce by them. (TMS II.n10)

The significance of notions of Providence within Smith's work has been the cause of much debate.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, what is most significant in this passage, for the present purposes, is the conception of humans as a species. Like all other species, says Smith, the most essential drives are those directed towards self-preservation. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, it is a consideration of the moral framework of human existence that is built upon this understanding.<sup>103</sup> In *The Wealth of Nations*, I suggest, we find a similar natural historical foundation, indeed much more developed, but the interest here is instead in the nature of societal subsistence.

In the so-called "early draft" of *The Wealth of Nations*, we find a passage that seems to link Smith's approach to political œconomy to the language of his earlier work.

In every other race of animals each individual is almost entirely independent, and in its ordinary and natural state has occasion for the assistance of no other living creature. When any uncommon misfortune befalls it, its piteous and doleful cries will sometimes engage its fellows, and sometimes prevail even upon man, to relieve it. When such assistance, however, becomes indispensibly necessary, the creature must generally lay its account with perishing for want of it. Such occasions can in the common course of things occur but seldom, and nature, with her usual œconomy, has not thought proper to make any particular provision for them, any more than she has made for the relief of man when he is ship wrecked in the middle of the ocean. Her great purpose, the continuance and propogation of each species, she has thought, was not likely to be interrupted by such uncommon and extraordinary accidents. But tho' an animal when once it has grown up to maturity stands but seldom in need of the assistance of its fellows, a man has almost constant occasion for the help of his bretheren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. (ED 22-3, 571)

A similar passage did indeed make it into the published versions of *The Wealth of Nations* (WN I.ii.2, 26), though the connections to the language of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* are easier to see in this draft version. In both the draft and the published versions, this leads to the famous statement

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<sup>102</sup> Whilst clearly seen in such passages within *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, explicit references to the Author of nature are absent within *The Wealth of Nations*. This has generated a huge literature in its own right about the extent to which Smith's political œconomy is influenced by Providential ideas. Particular attention has been paid to the whether the famous metaphor of the "invisible hand" is in fact referring to the hand of God. For a recent account of these debates, see Paul Oslington (2018).

<sup>103</sup> As also expressed in TMS II.n10, Smith considers his approach to be an empirical, rather than a normative account of "moral sentiments", an approach which renders it compatible with the empirical approach of natural history.

that,

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” (WN I.ii.2, 26-7)

An acknowledgement of the centrality of the problem of societal subsistence is far from universal in modern day readings of *The Wealth of Nations*. Historians of economic thought have focussed instead on those parts of the text that appear closer in concern to subsequent economics: his views on price formation, the question of value, and his conception of international trade, for example. Hont and Ignatieff (1983) were the first to argue explicitly for the centrality of subsistence in the construction of the text. In their reading, the core question posed by Smith is one of “needs and justice”. Whereas in former societies, a greater proportion of the products of an individual’s labour was returned to the labourer, modern “commercial society” returned only a fraction of this produce, generating vast inequalities. How was it, then, that such a society could provide for a better standard of living for the very poorest than the more equal societies of the past? (*ibid.*, 392). The debates surrounding this question, they suggest, also wrestled with the problems of whether such a society could instil virtuous tendencies in its citizens required to avoid the eventual decline faced by earlier civilizations.

This reading is extremely helpful in orienting an approach to the text, and the argument presented below similarly emphasizes the centrality of the question of subsistence. Nevertheless, neither in Hont and Ignatieff’s work nor anywhere else the literature is this developed into a detailed account of how Smith theorizes the relationship between humans and the earth. Jonsson’s (2010) account comes closest to the extent that it draws attention to the relevant parts of *The Wealth of Nations*, but the interest here is in the context of Smith’s arguments, rather than the theory itself. In what follows, therefore, I look at how an analysis of the shifting relationship between human beings and the earth is developed within the text, and how this brings to bear a natural historical account of the relationship between human labour and the land. This reading is necessarily selective, for the reason that the argument I will develop over the next two chapters requires me to differentiate this earth register from those of property and territory. Smith’s writing instead does not strictly delineate between these registers, for reasons that will become clear in the following chapters. Nevertheless, adopting this approach here allows us to see the how this natural historical account

of the relationship between land and labour acts as a foundation for the rest of the theory.

## Labour and subsistence

How, then, is this broad natural historical understanding of human existence expressed within the theoretical structure of *The Wealth of Nations*? The work is famously associated with the concept of labour, both through Smith's conception of value, and through the importance given to the division of labour as demonstrated in his often-quoted example of the pin factory. Here, I want to suggest that the conventional narrow focus on the labour concept comes at the expense of a recognition of how labour is conceived by Smith in relation to the products of the earth and their availability relative to human needs. Viewed in this way, the irreducibility of the material relationship between land and labour becomes apparent.

In relation to value, Smith suggests:

Every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniencies, and amusements of human life... The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labour which it enables him to purchase or command. Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities. (WN I.v.1, 47)

As noted above, the work has often been read by historians of economic thought in terms of its analysis of price formation. Monetized exchange of course presupposes some notion of value – an expression of how much of one good might be purchased for the cost of another. But in Smith's account this is only one of two possible uses of the term.

The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called 'value in use;' the other, 'value in exchange.' The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it. (WN I.iv.13, 44-5)

Of the two, value in exchange has received far greater attention, yet the use of things remains



extremely important within Smith's theoretical structure. Whilst labour certainly holds a key place within the construction of the work, I suggest that underpinning Smith's account of labour is the prior concept of "necessity". Looking again at the first quote above, we see that richness consists in the ability to afford the "necessaries, conveniencies, and amusements of human life". Though not strictly theorized, the idea of "necessaries" – elsewhere opposed simply to "luxuries" – is one that is recurrent through *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>104</sup> Food is the greatest of these necessaries, but "[a]fter food, cloathing and lodging are the two great wants of mankind" (WN I.xi.c.2, 178). Smith's reluctance to specify with any greater precision what the necessaries of life are, seems to be a function of a conception of necessity that changes with the development of society. In his own time, for example, he talks about the availability of "an agreeable and wholesome variety of food" that was now available to the labouring poor, and even such refined goods as "[s]oap, salt, candles, leather, and fermented liquors", though he suggests that the quantity that these individuals "are under any *necessity* of consuming" is very small (WN I.viii.35, 96, italics added). Nevertheless, what is certain is that, in all cases, the necessaries Smith is discussing consist in material goods.

Labour, as direct or indirect procurement of the material necessaries of life is the human action of ensuring subsistence, and in material terms this subsistence must ultimately in all societies be drawn, however directly or indirectly, from the land. As was noted in the previous chapter, subsistence is a key element of the stadial historical model. In the most primitive societies within Smith's stadial history, the relation between labour and the land is an immediate one.

The wood of the forest, the grass of the field, and all the natural fruits of the earth, ... when land was in common, cost the labourer only the trouble of gathering them (WN I.vi.8, 67)

Shortly before that, in a further statement of the notion of labour as the measure of exchange, Smith notes that,

IN that early and rude state of society which precedes both the accumulation of stock and the appropriation of land, the proportion between the quantities of labour necessary for acquiring different objects seems to be the only circumstance which can afford any rule for exchanging them for one another. If among a nation of hunters, for example, it usually costs twice the labour to kill a beaver which it does to kill a deer, one beaver should naturally exchange for or be worth two deer. It is natural that what is usually the produce of two days or two hours labour, should be worth double of what is usually the produce of one day's or one hour's labour. (WN I.vi.1, 65)

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<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Smith's comments in relation to taxation of necessaries and luxuries in V.ii.m.

Here, although trade between individuals is considered, this is thought to take the form of an exchange of what is essentially immediately available from the land. On a number of occasions Smith refers to these goods as the “spontaneous productions of the earth” (WN II.iii.3, 332). For these, no purposive input of human labour or materials is required, other than what is necessary to take physical possession of the plants or animals found in the surroundings.

However, in the course of the progress of societies, the advancement of the division of labour makes the individual’s provision of the necessities of life for themselves ever less direct. Commercial society represents a significant development in this respect.

When the division of labour has been once thoroughly established, it is but a very small part of a man's wants which the produce of his own labour can supply. He supplies the far greater part of them by exchanging that surplus part of the produce of his own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other men's labour as he has occasion for. Every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society. (WN Liv.1, 37)

In a highly developed market society, therefore, there are many individuals – particularly those working in the industries of the towns – who may obtain none of their necessary subsistence by using their labour to procure directly any of the products of the soil. Instead, they are obliged to use the remuneration for whatever kind of labour they do undertake to purchase the necessities of their subsistence in the market.

Even those working the land directly, however, are in this kind of society unlikely to be able to gain all of their subsistence needs through their own labour. This is a function of a fundamentally different relationship to the earth. The third stage of society in the stadial thesis inaugurates an important shift in this relationship through the establishment of agriculture. In Smith’s terms this sees a move away from reliance on the “spontaneous productions” of the land, towards the direction in a purposive manner of this earth’s natural production.

In agriculture... nature labours along with man; and though her labour costs no expence, its produce has its value, as well as that of the most expensive workmen. The most important operations of agriculture seem intended, not so much to increase, though they do that too, as to direct the fertility of nature towards the production of the plants most profitable to man (WN II.v.12, 363)

Agricultural labour is therefore, for Smith, a very special form of labour whereby the industry of individuals (and Smith even includes here that of working animals) is augmented by the “labour”

of the earth itself, which is subject to human direction.

It was noted in Chapter Three that the model for this third societal stage seems to be European feudalism. As will be discussed further in Chapter Four, Smith does give some consideration to modes of land tenancy other than modern capitalist farming, though these are not discussed in any systematic way. What is clear, however, is that forms of tenancy linked to feudalism, such as those of the cottager or villein, are associated with a more direct subsistence from the land for those tenants. Agriculture, as the planting of particular crops within a given area, necessarily implies the reduction in the diversity of the natural products of land (its “spontaneous productions”), in favour of an increased yield and an ease of harvesting brought about by the concentration of the desired plants within a particular area. Yet the land use practices associated with feudalism were still premised on the ability of feudal tenants to gain a majority of their subsistence from the land they worked and its surroundings. This was in a large part due to the persistence of “wastes”, areas surrounding agricultural lands which were not cultivated, allowing tenants various facilities such as firewood, and space to graze animals.

The subsistence of commercial society is, of course, still premised on agriculture, but Smith sees a shift in the nature of land use. In particular, the decline of wastes through enclosure decreased the possibilities for small occupiers of land to gain their subsistence through the resources available in their locality. In common with the sensibilities of the late eighteenth century, the decline of wastes was, for Smith, unambiguously a form of “improvement”. But he saw that this implied important changes for the way in which many individuals gained their subsistence.

As the poorest family can often maintain a cat or a dog, without any expence; so the poorest occupiers of land can commonly maintain a few poultry, or a sow and a few pigs, at ver [sic] little. The little offals of their own table, their whey, skimmed milk, and butter-milk, supply those animals with a part of their food, and they find the rest in the neighbouring fields without doing any sensible damage to any body. By diminishing the number of those small occupiers, therefore, the quantity of this sort of provisions which is thus produced at little or no expence, must certainly have been a good deal diminished (WN I.xi.k.10, 243-4).

Under such conditions, being a worker of the land would no longer imply the ability to gain the majority – or even, depending on one’s role in the process of production, a part – of one’s

subsistence from that land. Rather, the decline in unimproved land meant that an individual's subsistence must be obtained with increasing completeness through the market. The use of land for the cultivation of food crops was the first stage in this process. But the attendant decline in uncultivated foodstuffs – and those other parts of the “spontaneous productions” of the soil that would in less developed societies provide various non-food elements of an individual's subsistence – would in time necessarily lead to an unfulfilled demand that justified the conversion of a dedicated portion of land to the cultivation of these items. Such items of subsistence notably include the wood required by individuals both for fuel and building, which becomes ever scarcer with the advancement of agriculture:

In its rude beginnings the greater part of every country is covered with wood... As agriculture advances, the woods are partly cleared by the progress of tillage, and partly go to decay in consequence of the increased number of cattle. These, though they do not increase in the same proportion as corn, which is altogether the acquisition of human industry, yet multiply under the care and protection of men; who store up in the season of plenty what may maintain them in that of scarcity, who through the whole year furnish them with a greater quantity of food than uncultivated nature provides for them, and who by destroying and extirpating their enemies, secure them in the free enjoyment of all that she provides. Numerous herds of cattle, when allowed to wander through the woods, though they do not destroy the old trees, hinder any young ones from coming up, so that in the course of a century or two the whole forest goes to ruin. (WN I.xi.c.16, 183)

Although “corn” is assumed to be the first agricultural product to which land is dedicated, Smith also describes the progressive dedication of lands to the cultivation of foodstuffs in commercial society that in agricultural societies could be cultivated only by individuals and on a small scale.

Many sorts of vegetable food, besides, which in the rude state of agriculture are confined to the kitchen-garden, and raised only by the spade, come in its improved state to be introduced into common fields, and to be raised by the plough (WN I.xi.m.9, 259).

Smith does state that the possible extent of the division of labour seems to be less in agriculture than in other forms of human industry (WN I.i.4, 16). But clearly the situation described here is one which by necessity dictates a certain division in that portion of human labour which is devoted to the working of the land. The process outlined is one of transition from a condition in which an individual cultivator is able to obtain a large part of their own subsistence by raising plants and animals in the field or garden, or by harvesting the “spontaneous productions” of the surrounding lands, towards one in which a cultivator specializes in the production of a much narrower range of products, grown at scale, relying on exchange, and thus the labour of others, to provide for the

range of their subsistence needs.

Seen through the lens of Smith's anthropomorphization of nature, however, this process of a division of human labour is paralleled in a division of nature's own "labour", in the form of the specialization of land use.<sup>105</sup> Whereas once, a given portion of land may have provided a diversity of products, in the progress of improvement, it comes increasingly to yield only that much more limited variety of goods towards which humans have chosen to direct its production. For Smith, this has a clear spatial dimension. In the earliest forms of society, when subsistence was gained solely from the spontaneous products of the soil, societies were based on shifting habitation as a result of the need to cover a large area of land from which sufficient of these spontaneous productions could be gathered. As Smith points out, the very limited kind of direction of nature's fertility that consisted in the keeping of herds of animals nevertheless represented a key advantage of shepherding societies over hunter gatherers in this respect.

[I]n proportion to the natural fertility of the countries which they inhabited, [shepherding societies] were... much more populous... and the difference is very great between the number of shepherds and that of hunters whom the same extent of equally fertile territory can maintain. (WN IV.vii.c.100, 634)

With the establishment of agriculture, it was the proximity of wastes to agricultural lands that ensured access to the majority of the necessities of life for members of the society. This implied a new spatial configuration in which dwelling and sites dedicated to the directed production of necessary plants were delineated, with liminal areas not subjected to a strict human control of nature's production, but rather left undirected in order that its spontaneous productions might provide a mix of use values. The stability of this configuration is challenged, for Smith, by the linked forces of population growth, increasing cultivation, and the rise of commerce. A growing population would naturally increase demand for foodstuffs, requiring ever further land to be taken into cultivation, but, in doing so, would simultaneously diminish the space available for the spontaneous production of other subsistence needs, which would therefore have to be satisfied by market-based provision. The ability to get such goods as timber or "butchers-meat" (e.g. WN I.xi.b.6, 164) to market therefore implied the necessity of designating dedicated portions of land

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<sup>105</sup> Ryan Walter terms this Smith's "anthropological conceit" (Walter 2011, 71)

for their production, as, in Smith's words,

to collect the scanty and scattered produce of waste and unimproved lands would require too much labour and be too expensive. (WN I.xi.k.3, 238)

Although the ability of the land to support population, in Smith's view, increases through this process, this increased productivity does not imply the spatial concentration of the production of an individual's subsistence. On the contrary, the division of nature's labour through the specialization of land use means that timber that would likely in agricultural societies be drawn from the locality, might in the progress of commerce come to be drawn from much further afield.<sup>106</sup> Smith's assertion "That the Division of Labour is limited by the Extent of the Market" (title of WN I.iii) in this sense holds as much for the division of nature's labour, in the form of land specialization, as it does for human labour. As the content of that chapter makes clear, the "extent" of a market is conceived not, as might be more common today, in terms of volume of transactions, but rather in much more physical and spatial terms:

The inland parts of the country can for a long time have no other market for the greater part of their goods, but the country which lies round about them, and separates them from the sea-coast, and the great navigable rivers. The extent of their market, therefore, must for a long time be in proportion to the riches and populousness of that country, and consequently their improvement must always be posterior to the improvement of that country. In our North American colonies the plantations have constantly followed either the sea-coast or the banks of the navigable rivers, and have scarce any where extended themselves to any considerable distance from both. (WN I.iii.4, 34)

In Smith's vision, therefore, the development of markets is not an infinite process, but one that has its end point in "the compleat improvement and cultivation of the country" (WN I.xi.k.12, 245). At this point, land would be specialized in a sufficiently diverse range of uses to provide for the maximum possible proportion of the subsistence of its inhabitants through the marketized production of all necessary, and indeed non-necessary, goods. A country reaching this would be "fully peopled" (WN I.ix.14, 111), and a "stationary state" (WN I.viii.24, 89) would be reached, with the society having reached its "full complement of riches" (*ibid.*). It is important to note that improvement, here, encompasses both the more specific notion of technological improvements to land and agriculture, discussed further below, but also the more general notion of conversion

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<sup>106</sup> An illustrative example of this is seen in Smith's mention of the recent construction, within only a few years, of Edinburgh's New Town, in which "there is not, perhaps, a single stick of Scotch timber" (WN I.xi.c.16, 183). On the appositeness of Smith's comment in view of the importance of timber to eighteenth century estate owners, see Thomas (1984, 200).

of wastes to directed production.

## Space, land use, and a theory of material exchange

We can see, therefore, that the natural historical dimension of Smith's account of land found in what I am calling his earth register includes both a sense of the materiality and spatiality of human subsistence. Smith is clear that the progressive specialization of land is mediated, both at the level of the individual and of society as a whole, by considerations of value. The connection between land, improvement, subsistence, and value is neatly summarized in the following passage.

Land in its original rude state can afford the materials of cloathing and lodging to a much greater number of people than it can feed. In its improved state it can sometimes feed a greater number of people than it can supply with those materials... In the one state, therefore, there is always a super-abundance of those materials, which are frequently, upon that account, of little or no value. In the other there is often a scarcity, which necessarily augments their value. (WN I.xi.c.1, 176)

Given the centrality of land and improvement to the construction of *The Wealth of Nations*, taking account of this dynamic is key to understanding the way Smith sets up his discussion of value within the text. With the development of societies, Smith says, increasing numbers of subsistence goods shift from having only value in use (i.e. a utility for the individual gathering the resource) to having a value in exchange. This is because as long as these goods are available for free as spontaneous productions of land in the locality, no individual would expend anything with exchangeable value (money or otherwise) in order to obtain them. But the progressive diminution of wastes – led always in the first place by the extension of cultivation – means that, in time, ever more goods become sufficiently hard to come by in the locality, with the result that an individual will find it easier to obtain these goods instead by exchange.

In this way the labour concept is importantly linked to land via the question of subsistence. In Smith's system, value is not reducible to value in exchange, because it is assumed that, even in the most advanced commercial societies of his day, many individuals would still obtain at least a part of their subsistence, in one way or another, directly from the spontaneous productions of the earth. But this is not the only way land and labour are closely linked. Whilst much of the above discussion has focussed on the raw products of land, whether the result of directed or spontaneous

production, Smith is clear that all material goods are ultimately derived from the earth. This is visible throughout the work in his discussion of a produce which can be variously in a “rude” or “manufactured” state (e.g. WN III.i.1, 376). Smith’s notion of manufacturing suggests that it is a species of labour that, whilst not directly involved in the procurement new physical materials from the earth, nevertheless “fixes” itself in a material product. In Smith’s words:

[T]he labour of the manufacturer fixes and realizes itself in some particular subject or vendible commodity, which lasts for some time at least after that labour is past. It is, as it were, a certain quantity of labour stocked and stored up to be employed, if necessary, upon some other occasion. (WN II.iii.1, 330)

This idea that labour might be “stored” in a physical good plays an important role in relation to the spatiality of value.

[T]hough neither the rude produce, nor even the coarse manufacture, could, without the greatest difficulty, support the expence of a considerable land carriage, the refined and improved manufacture easily may... A piece of fine cloth, for example, which weighs only eighty pounds, contains in it, the price, not only of eighty pounds weight of wool, but sometimes of several thousand weight of corn, the maintenance of the different working people... The corn, which could with difficulty have been carried abroad in its own shape, is in this manner virtually exported in that of the complete manufacture, and may easily be sent to the remotest corners of the world. (WN III.iii.20, 409)

Here, Smith’s point is that raw produce of land is generally bulky and therefore costly to bring to market. So, for transportation over any distance, more refined, manufactured goods are more suitable. The reasoning he gives here is that the application of labour in refining the raw produce of land will, generally speaking, reduce its bulk, because waste materials will be discarded and, for example in the case of textile production, the manufactured product might be physically more compact – as in the spinning of wool. The fact that these processes have been completed means both that transportation of refined goods is generally less costly, and that it saves the buyer the expense of completing these processes themselves. The higher the degree of refinement of the original produce of land, the more suitable the goods for trade.

Greater attention throughout the work is paid to reproductive land uses – that is, those that take advantage of the “natural fertility” of the soil, such as the production of food, wood, and animal products. Of all modes of obtaining the necessary human subsistence from the earth, these, for Smith, have priority. In his words:

It is the produce of land which draws the fish from the waters; and it is the produce of



the surface of the earth which extracts the minerals from its bowels. (WN II.i.27, 284)

Of these two other modes, fishing receives very little attention through the work, but Smith does devote significant space to consideration of the products of extractive industry. Although a number of special cases are discussed where reproductive uses of land are tied to special locations, due to the presence of special soils, or particular species (e.g. WN I.xi.b.30, 172), in general, directed reproductive land uses are assumed to be determined, above all, by human need and agency. If there is a greater demand for wheat, for example, more land will be turned over to its production. This is not so for extractive industry. Although new sources of mineral goods can be found, it is beyond the capacity of human labour to effect the increase of these.

Smith thus sees an important distinction between those goods which it is within “the power of human industry to multiply” (WN I.xi.i.1, 234), and those which it is not, devoting considerable space to a detailed consideration of which industries fall into which category, or indeed fall between the two (WN I.xi.i-1). Like other goods, the value of these is a function of their utility and their scarcity, which determines the spatial extent of their markets. Coals, for example, are relatively common, as compared to other mineral products of the earth, and as sources of fuel are substitutable with wood. These, therefore, are unlikely to be transported over any great distance (WN I.xi.c.20, 185). At the other extreme, however, precious metals such as gold and silver are rare, and their use, now adopted in “all countries” (WN I.iv.4, 38), as a medium of exchange, leads to a high demand. For this reason, “the market for the produce of a silver mine may extend over the whole known world” (WN I.xi.d.2, 194). For the present purposes, it is significant that so much of the discussion of money is concerned with its mineral nature. For Smith, although money as a social practice introduces various complications, the fundamental dynamics of exchange involving money are importantly determined by its materiality. As he goes to great lengths to demonstrate, the gold and silver that are used to mint money are as much a part of the “rude produce of land” (WN I.xi.g.37, 228) as any reproducible goods. To the extent that these enter into processes of exchange, therefore, their value must also be understood as a function of the conditions of their procurement.

Whilst it is significant that Smith’s description of processes of exchange involving goods and money is a material one, there is one further key way in which the materiality of processes of

subsistence is demonstrated. If this was the extent of Smith's account, it would be tempting to conclude that "exchange" was limited only to the sphere of human trade, and indeed this is how Smith is almost exclusively read. The relationship to the earth appears here as a one-sided process, one in which humans do not exchange, but simply take what they need. Though the "labour" of nature is recognized by Smith, this is a service that, as we saw above, "costs no expence". If this is true, however, then elsewhere Smith's own comments indicate that this might be so only in a purely monetary sense. Whilst, it is certainly the case that the "taking" aspect of the relationship between humans and the earth garners by far the greater attention in the work, a number of passages indicate Smith's awareness of a certain obligation of repayment to nature in this process.<sup>107</sup> This takes the form of a necessity, brought on by the instantiation of agriculture, to replenish soils which are otherwise bound to become "entirely exhausted" (WN I.xi.k.3, 238) through the forcing of production. Smith therefore gives detailed consideration to contemporary practices of manuring, and their role in either advancing or holding back the progress of improvement.

Here, cattle play a key role, and again, for Smith, the consideration is a spatial and material one. In land's natural and unimproved state, cattle are part of the spontaneous productions of the earth, and no labour is required to sustain the cycle of natural production. In agriculture, however, the natural cycling of materials is broken, and as such the problem of sourcing additional soil nutrients becomes important.

In all farms too distant from any town to carry manure from it, that is, in the far greater part of those of every extensive country, the quantity of well-cultivated land must be in proportion to the quantity of manure which the farm itself produces; and this again must be in proportion to the stock of cattle which are maintained upon it. The land is manured either by pasturing the cattle upon it, or by feeding them in the stable, and from thence carrying out their dung to it. (WN I.xi.k.3, 238)

Jonsson (2010, 1354) notes that, in the absence of large herds of cattle, farming practice in Smith's day relied on such "night soils" from local towns as a means of fertilizing farmland. In fact, the idea of a simple division of nature's labour through the specialization of land described above is complicated somewhat here. In relation to agriculture and the keeping of cattle, in particular,

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<sup>107</sup> This has received barely any coverage within the secondary literature on Smith. The notable exception is the excellent contextual account of Smith's engagement with questions of agricultural ecology by Fredrik Jonsson (2010, see also 2013).

Smith's description seems to evoke a rather more nuanced picture of land use. The mechanism involved in this is not entirely explicit, but mention of the recent introduction of fodder crops such as clover (e.g. WN I.xi.k.8, 243) implies that the use of crop rotations forms a part of this mixed husbandry. Nevertheless, it is clear that the question of proximity between cattle and cultivated land is decisive.

The above quote hints also at a further aspect of the spatiality of subsistence that becomes important to the arguments of the text – the division between town and country.<sup>108</sup> This division is itself defined by the materiality of production:

The town, in which there neither is nor can be any reproduction of substances, may very properly be said to gain its whole wealth and subsistence from the country. (WN III.i.1, 377)

The town, therefore, is a form of land use that due to the density of dwellings, cannot also simultaneously provide for the subsistence of its inhabitants. In this sense, the town and country divide might be thought to constitute a further spatial aspect of the division of labour. This is true both in terms of a division of land use, and, relatedly in the division of human labour associated with the town and country formation. As Smith notes, many unproductive forms of employment – those in which the individual does not directly produce any part of the material necessities or luxuries of life – such as the work of a porter, are only possible in the vicinity of a “great town” (WN I.iii.2, 31). Smith's comments elsewhere in the text do suggest that the original development of this spatial formation had more to do with considerations of defensibility than an efficient organization of labour.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, in terms of understanding the nature of subsistence in settled societies, the town and country relation is a key aspect determining land use.

## Conclusion

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<sup>108</sup> The focus on the town and country is another aspect of Smith's inheritance from the Physiocrats. As Hont and Ignatieff (2010 [1983]) emphasize, the regulation of the grain trade was of particular concern during the 1750s and 60s in France in the context of persistent food shortages. A theoretical focus on the town and country relation can be traced to François Quesnay's 1757 article on “grains” in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. The relation to earth is perhaps more visible in the French, *la campagne* – which Quesnay opposes to *les villes* – being derived etymologically from the Latin *campus* for “field”.

<sup>109</sup> Smith discusses the spatiality of settlement in the Greek *polis* briefly at WN III.iii.1, 397. As we will see in Chapter Five, the town and country relationship under European feudalism is the topic of lengthy consideration through book three.

What emerges, then, from a reading of *The Wealth of Nations* which foregrounds the role of land as earth, is a vision of an irreducibly material set of processes. The whole of human industry, for Smith, must be understood in relation to the underlying mechanics of subsistence. Here, the stadial thesis paints a picture of an evolving relationship between human societies and the earth. At each point, the possibilities of subsistence are determined by the physicality of human labour in relation to the nonhuman environment – that is, to the earth and its plants and animals. Considerations of the density of population, for example, translate into alterations of the physical proximity of natural resources, giving rise to a division of labour which is expressed both in terms of human occupations, and patterns of land use. Markets do not form the starting point of this analysis, but rather are, for Smith, a natural product of population growth, societal development and the changing demands of subsistence. Moreover, these do not extinguish the material and spatial considerations that determine the possibilities of human subsistence, but do importantly modify them.

Earth, therefore, constitutes the first register in which I suggest Smith thinks about land. As is evident from the above discussion, this can be conceived largely in its own terms, as the development of a natural historical account of human subsistence. Although ideas of property and territory are certainly implicit in parts of this discussion, this earth register is, I suggest, broadly coherent in its own terms, and as such does not rely on these other concepts for its articulation. In this sense, of the three, earth is the prior, and most fundamental register. But this does not mean that property and territory are entirely distinct. Instead, as we will see in the following chapters, both follow from the same essentially natural historical mode of reasoning. Moreover, as I will also suggest in the following chapters, the consideration of land as both property and territory do not obscure the conception of the relationship between humans and the earth as comprising a set of material exchanges. On the contrary, property and territory can be understood in terms of a set of practices that serve an important role in mediating these material processes.

Finally, it is worth noting that what I am terming the earth register of Smith's conception of land is where we can see what we might today understand as the most explicitly "ecological" aspects of Smith's thought to be made visible. This is seen particularly in his frequently overlooked account

of land use change, and the associated discussion of soil fertility. More broadly however, what I have tried to emphasize here is the centrality of questions of subsistence to the theoretical construction of the work. This understanding of subsistence is one that understands it explicitly as a material relationship between the human species and the earth. What starts to become clear as we move to property and territory in the following chapters is that this understanding of subsistence is not ancillary to what are today seen as the more recognizably “economic” aspects of the text, but is integral to how political economy is understood as a whole. As we will see, property and territory are themselves not understood as reified categories in their own right, but rather as sets of practices responding to and influencing the nature of the material relationship between humans and the earth. It is in this way that a nuanced, materialized understanding of land can be seen to emerge from the work.

# 5 – Adam Smith III: Land in the register of property

## Introduction

The second register in which I suggest Smith discusses land within *The Wealth of Nations* is that of “property”. That land as property should be an important consideration in Smith’s work is perhaps not surprising. He wrote at a time when the progress of land enclosure in Britain was gathering pace, with older patterns of land ownership and use derived from the feudal system giving way to capitalistic forms of ownership and agricultural production (see Thompson 1982 [1963], 1991; Jones 2016; Christophers 2018, ch.2). This provided an important point of contrast with other great European powers, particularly France, where the Physiocrats had viewed England’s more advanced capitalistic agriculture as something to be emulated. Simultaneously, the dynamics of land appropriation in the colonies, and particularly Britain’s North American colonies, provided another important point of reference for Smith’s political economy. Yet, as this chapter will argue, it is not only Smith’s understanding of property *in* land that is significant. As the historian Keith Thomas notes, for Smith, the first forms of property were not land itself but crops and herds (Thomas 1984, 28). Whilst land is certainly seen to be a very special form of property, therefore, Smith’s comments clearly indicate that all other forms of property are to be understood as ultimately the products *of* land.

In the previous chapter, it was suggested that Smith’s “earth” register discusses human relations to land in terms of processes of material exchange. This materiality remains clearly visible in the present chapter, but the focus here is on how such exchanges are mediated by relations of property, which govern the relationship between individuals and things. In Smith’s account, this is an evolving relationship, with contemporary commercial societies reflecting just one stage of development. This chapter thus again reinforces the centrality of history to Smith’s approach noted in Chapter Three, and I suggest such a historicized understanding of property is fundamental to the way in which Smith conceives of market exchange. Yet historians of economic thought

have overwhelmingly ignored Smith's views on property. This is certainly a function of the tendency of subsequent economics to treat settled modern, capitalistic property rights as a precondition for economic analysis.<sup>110</sup> As a result of this retrospective imposition of the perspective of modern economics, therefore, these accounts have tended to sever Smith's analysis of market relations from its underpinnings in an account of the historical development of property.

Historians of property have frequently noted Smith's importance to eighteenth century debates (e.g. Flanagan and Parel 1979; Brewer and Staves 1995; Garnsey 2007; Wood 2012; Linklater 2013). This tends to be discussed in terms of his broader contribution to discussions of commerce and poverty, however, and his own historical account of property is rarely considered on its own terms (significant exceptions include Fleischacker 2004; Salter 2010). The more contextualist work on Smith and eighteenth century Scottish political economy in general has emphasized links to the tradition of natural jurisprudence following Hugo Grotius, and which in England runs particularly through Selden, Hobbes, and Locke (Winch 1978; Haakonssen 1981; Hont and Ignatieff 1983). Saether emphasizes the particular influence of Samuel Pufendorf on these Scottish thinkers, especially through his reception in the work of Gershom Carmichael and Francis Hutcheson (Saether 2017).

As such, particular attention is paid here to the role of property in Smith's stadial history. This, it must be remembered, is intended as an account of the "natural" course of societal development, and the institutions that will arise at different stages. In relation to this natural account of the development of property in Smith's thought, the work of John Salter is particularly useful (1994, 2000, 2010, 2012).<sup>111</sup> Salter emphasizes Smith's adherence to the Grotian tradition of natural jurisprudence, and its pattern of reasoning about the origins of various aspects of Roman law

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<sup>110</sup> One of Keith Tribe's key points in his *Land, labour and economic discourse* (1978) is that the anachronistic assumption of capitalistic property rights has been a significant source of confusion amongst historians of economic thought, who, he suggests, have used the presence of the term "rent" as an indication of economic discourse. Tribe's account historicizes the category of rent, showing that, in earlier discourses, this does not necessarily denote the same set of social and legal relations, and cannot be held to play the same theoretical role as it does in nineteenth century political economy.

<sup>111</sup> The contributions of Witztum could also be included here (1997, 2005). Witztum opposes some of the views put forward by Salter. However the usefulness of these contributions for the present purposes is limited by their self-conscious adherence to a method of "analytical reconstruction" (Witztum 2005, 280), which seems to be analogous to the method of "rational reconstruction" in the history of economic thought that was rejected here in Chapter Two.

(2010). Here, however, I foreground the centrality of land within all of Smith's thought around property, and highlight the continuity of this reasoning with the conceptual foundations of his analysis of market exchange. Whilst the "property" register discussed in this chapter can be discussed in its own right, therefore, it nevertheless forms a continuous line of thought with the aspects of the discussion conducted in the "earth" register presented in the previous chapter.

In what follows, the first section introduces Smith's conception of the natural development of property, as a mediation of the relationship between labour and the earth, privileging the stadial mode of historical reasoning. The second section instead sees Smith mobilizing his narrative history register in order to account for the unnatural departure from this model in European feudal societies. This focuses on the negative effects of the insecurity of property in Europe following the fall of Rome, as expressed in the opposition of the town and countryside. The third section looks at how the conception of property that emerges from these discussions underpins Smith's account of processes of production and market exchange. In all of these contexts, land remains a central concern, and as this third section demonstrates, the development of the account of market exchange does not displace this centrality, but rather can be understood instead to describe the latest evolution of human relations with the earth.

## **The natural history of property**

References to property abound throughout the pages of *The Wealth of Nations*, though Smith's explicit comments on property as a concept are not well developed. Nevertheless, what Smith does say explicitly about property within *The Wealth of Nations* is suggestive, and helps to shed light on the processes of exchange described in the previous chapter. Where property is discussed more directly, it is especially in relation to the stadial theory. Here the question of the relationship of an individual's own labour to their property is central.

The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. (WN I.x.c.12, 138)

Property over the products of one's own labour is here presented as the original, foundational form of property, on which all others build. But whilst labour might be a foundational



consideration in relation to the justice of property, elsewhere, Smith indicates that actual physical possession of the products of one's own labour is a rule that cannot survive the introduction of more developed forms of property.

In that original state of things, which precedes both the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock, the whole produce of labour belongs to the labourer. He has neither landlord nor master to share with him... But this original state of things... could not last beyond the first introduction of the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock. (WN I.viii.1-5, 82)

These comments are further developed in book V in relation to the role of government.

Among nations of hunters, as there is scarce any property, or at least none that exceeds the value of two or three days labour; so there is seldom any established magistrate or any regular administration of justice. Men who have no property can injure one another only in their persons or reputations. But when one man kills, wounds, beats, or defames another, though he to whom the injury is done suffers, he who does it receives no benefit. It is otherwise with the injuries to property. The benefit of the person who does the injury is often equal to the loss of him who suffers it... The acquisition of valuable and extensive property, therefore, necessarily requires the establishment of civil government. (WN V.i.b.2, 709-10)

Here, property is explicitly linked to a need for government, and in this respect the move from the hunting stage to shepherding seems to mark an important development.

It is in the age of shepherds, in the second period of society, that the inequality of fortune first begins to take place, and introduces among men a degree of authority and subordination which could not possibly exist before. (WN V.i.b.12, 715)

These rather disparate comments hint at a fuller account of property, and its historical development, but this is left undeveloped. The relation between the possession of the fruits of an individual's labour and more developed forms of property, for example, seems unclear. Similarly, the precise ways in which property contributes to making shepherding a more advanced form of society is not made explicit. In this instance, reading these comments in relation to Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* is helpful. These lectures indicate that what appears in *The Wealth of Nations* as merely pointing towards a more detailed history of property in fact rests upon a much more comprehensive treatment of the topic within Smith's teaching.<sup>112</sup> In this, the transition from the

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<sup>112</sup> It is of course necessary to exercise caution in ascribing consistency between different phases of Smith's work. The lectures, believed to be from the academic year 1762-3 and 1763-4, took place some time before the composition of published version of *The Wealth of Nations*. As was suggested in Chapter Three, whilst much historicist work has sought to emphasize the coherence between this work and the earlier *Lectures*, this has come at the expense of

hunting stage to shepherding is particularly significant. Whilst Smith's comments in *The Wealth of Nations* imply that property is a crucial consideration in the transition from hunting to shepherding, this is explained much more fully in the *Lectures*:

The step betwixt these two is of all others the greatest in the progression of society, for by it the notion of property is extended beyond possession, to which it is in the former state confined. When this is once established, it is a matter of no great difficulty to extend this from one subject to another, from herds and flocks to the land itself. (LJ(A) ii.97, 107)

Here, in a theme that is developed at some length, Smith suggests that in hunting societies, property is linked to the "laws of nature" (LJ(B) 19, 404) by which possession constitutes the sole form of ownership. Once physically parted from an object, the individual loses any natural claim of ownership. In this state, there can be no claim to property even, for example, in particular animals, and, as such, the notion of property in the land itself remains beyond the possibilities of thought.<sup>113</sup> It is in this respect that shepherding constitutes, for Smith, the greatest advance in the stages of society. It is at this point that individuals must agree to recognize property as something that an individual can have control over, not only when the object is in their direct possession. The crucial innovation, therefore, is that property is separated from literal proximity. As Salter (2010) notes, the notion of an agreement here is crucial. Property moves from being something defined solely by the laws of nature – in terms of actual possession – to a convention backed (at least implicitly) by a human agreement. It is in this sense that government becomes so important in Smith's shepherding stage. For the first time, regular government of the community is required in order to arbitrate between property disputes.

[T]he age of shepherds is that where government first commences. Property makes it absolutely necessary. When once it has been agreed that a cow or a sheep shall belong to a certain person not only when actually in his possession but where ever it may have strayed, it is absolutely necessary that the hand of government should be continually held up and the community assert their power to preserve the property of the individuals.

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acknowledging significant changes in Smith's thought between the end of his lecturing, and the publication of the first edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly as relates to the influence of the Physiocrats on Smith (see Watson, forthcoming). In the case of Smith's comments on property in relation to his stadial history, however, the views expressed within the lectures seem to be consistent with the comments found in *The Wealth of Nations*. Whilst the interest here is primarily in what is actually said in the latter (as opposed to Smith's authorial intentions), paying some attention to his approach within the *Lectures* helps to support a reading that brings out ideas that remain otherwise only implicit, particularly with regards to the nature of property as a material and spatial process.

<sup>113</sup> Smith does discuss the actual activity of hunting as a partial exception to this rule. If an individual catches an animal, which then escapes, he should be regarded as having a greater claim to it as property than other individuals, at least so long as there is a probability of the animal being recovered by the individual (LJ(A) 41, 18-9).

The chase can no longer be depended on for the support of any one. All the animalls fit for the support of man are in a great measure appropriated. Certain individualls become very rich in flocks and herds, possessed of many cattle and sheep, while others have not one single animall. One will have a stock sufficient to maintain himself and 50 or 60 besides himself, when others have not any thing whereon to subsist themselves. (LJ(A), iv. 21-2).

As in *The Wealth of Nations*, this discussion is conducted very much in terms of the materiality of human subsistence. Here, as we saw in Chapter Four, Smith pays a lot of attention to the “spontaneous productions of the earth”, and in the *Lectures* a very similar attention to the relation between naturally occurring products and human labour is central to the enquiry into the origins of property.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, as we can see from the above quote, for Smith, it is the same line of reasoning serves to account for the origins of inequality and government. It is interesting to note that this account of property is essentially psychological. As the above quote indicates, Smith sees the move from hunting to shepherding, with the separation of property and possession, as a greater conceptual advance than the extension of this enlarged notion of property to an area of the earth itself. Nevertheless, the extension of property to land is seen as also requiring an important shift in understanding.

The life of a shepherd requires that he should frequently change his situation, or at least the place of his pasturing, to find pasture for his cattle. The property of the spot he built on would be conceived to end as soon as he had left it, in the same manner as the seats in a theatre or a hut on the shore belong no longer to any person than they are possessed by him. They would not easily conceive a subject of such extent as land is, should belong to an object so little as a single man. (LJ(A) i.48-9, 21-2)

Smith’s explanation for the emergence of property in land suggests that at first, it was the community as a whole that took possession of a large area of land, to the exclusion of outsiders. But within this territory, land was still, for a long time, held in common.

[H]ere the property is conceived to continue no longer in a private person than he actually possessed the subject. A field that had been pastured on by one man would be considered to be his no longer than he actually staid on it. Even after the invention of agriculture it was some time before the land was divided into particular properties. At first the whole community cultivated a piece of ground in common; they divided the crops produced by this piece of ground amongst the severall inhabitants according to the numbers in each family and the rank of the severall individualls... The first origin of private property would probably be mens taking themselves to fixt habitations and living together in cities,

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<sup>114</sup> Although the discussion of the natural products is extensive with the *Lectures*, the term “spontaneous productions” which is used frequently within *The Wealth of Nations* appears only once in the available lecture notes (LJ(B) 260, 510).

which would probably be the case in every improved society. The field they would cultivate when living together in this manner would be that which lies most contiguous to them. As their place of abode was now become fixt, it would readily appear to them to be the easiest method to make a division of the land once for all, rather than be put to the unnecessary trouble of dividing the product every year. (LJ(A) i.49-51, 2)

This discussion of property within Smith's *Lectures* could be explored in greater detail. But for the present purposes, it is sufficient to note that, though substantially more developed, the tone and content of Smith's consideration of property here seems entirely consistent with the scattered comments found within *The Wealth of Nations*. Although the latter are much less developed, the expanded view of the *Lectures* helps to make sense of the otherwise potentially ambiguous statements quoted above. The relation of labour to property, for example, is clarified by the explanation that the labour which grants possession of an item in the earliest societies is a natural, primordial form of property that is no longer recognized once extended forms of property by agreement are in place. Similarly, the origins of both government and inequality in the stage of shepherding are explained by the fact, not clearly expressed within *The Wealth of Nations*, that Smith understands this as the point when such extended notions of property came into existence.<sup>115</sup>

What is so important about this, from the present point of view, is that the commentary found in the *Lectures* supports what is already implicit from a close reading of *The Wealth of Nations* – that property is conceived, above all, in material terms. Rather than a purely abstract set of rights and obligations, property involves, for Smith, a mediation of the material processes that underpin societal subsistence. It is, in effect, a mechanism for regulating the interactions between humans and the nonhuman environment in a manner that ensures the subsistence of individuals – albeit one that following the development of property by agreement in the second stage of society is apt to generate a significant inequality in the apportionment of the earth's resources amongst these individuals. Although Smith recognizes the important role of ideas in the formation of property, the primary consideration here, as elsewhere in his stadial history, is one of population (e.g. LJ(A)

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<sup>115</sup> The link drawn between property, government, and inequality brings Smith here close to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (2004 [1754]). Scholarship has focussed less on the relation between Smith and Rousseau on the question of property, so much as the extent to which Smith drew on or contested Rousseau's ideas around self-interest. For a review of this literature see Pierre Force (2017). Surprisingly, even the recent, detailed, book-length treatment of the "philosophical encounter" between Smith and Rousseau by Charles Griswold (2017) makes barely any reference to property at all, and certainly does not compare their views in detail.

i.27, 14).<sup>116</sup> Forms of property by agreement are seen to develop in tandem with the changing exigencies of subsistence as population expands.

From this perspective we start to see that Smith's property register does not belong to a totally separate sphere of analysis, but rather is entirely consistent with his earth register. Both demonstrate the centrality of what is clearly for Smith a natural historical line of reasoning, and indeed we can now see more clearly what his supporter and colleague at the University of Glasgow, John Millar meant in saying that Smith's approach can be understood as a "natural history of legal establishments" (Millar 2006 [1787]).<sup>117</sup> An understanding of the historicity of property, therefore, is a key part of understanding the historicity of human subsistence in general. Whilst property is clearly a distinct consideration for Smith (being, beyond the first stage, a social institution), it nevertheless forms a continuous line of reasoning with the whole set of questions around the materiality and spatiality of subsistence, land use, and soil fertility that we saw in the previous chapter. It is important to emphasize that property here emerges not simply as a pact or agreement between humans, but as a set of materialized practices mediating the relationship between humans and the earth. In putting forward these views, we can understand Smith himself as engaging in a tradition of jurisprudential practice, and particularly one associated with the tradition of Roman law. But, simultaneously, through this practice, we can start to see the careful attention he pays to a spectrum of much more everyday practices, from agriculture and the procurement of goods, to the enforcement of property claims. In what follows, we see the diversity of these practices, and the detailed attention Smith pays to them. It is in drawing attention to these, the intricacy of the web of conceptual relations around land starts to become clear.

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<sup>116</sup> Salter supports this reading. He argues that Hugo Grotius is in fact the key influence on Smith in respect to property, and the conjectural history of its development. Nevertheless, he sees Smith diverging from Grotius's more theologically-informed account by placing the full weight of explanation for the development of institutions of property on population growth (Salter 2010, 18). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith wrote explicitly in praise of Grotius's understanding of "those principles which ought to run through, and be the foundation of the laws of all nations" (TMS VII.iv.37).

<sup>117</sup> In this respect Millar read Smith's approach alongside those of Montesquieu and Lord Kames. The idea of Smith and other contemporary Scottish writers as undertaking a "natural history of mankind" has been supported by a number of more recent scholars looking at the relationship between political economy, or the Scottish Enlightenment, and natural history (Skinner 1967; Wood 1990; Schabas 2003).

## The civil history of property

We have seen how the stadial thesis puts forward a natural history of property. However, elsewhere in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith offers further useful comments on land and property by juxtaposing this with the “unnatural” pattern of development that he considers to have taken place under European feudal society. The key problem here, he suggests, was a general insecurity of property lasting for many centuries, which resulted from the dissolution of the law and order provided by Roman imperial power. In this context, the “usurpation” of great tracts of land across Europe by invaders (WN III.ii.1, 382) disrupted the natural pattern of property, by subordinating the societal relationship to the earth to the demands of the defensibility of property. Here, the ownership and inheritance of land became crucial:

When land, like moveables, is considered as the means only of subsistence and enjoyment, the natural law of succession divides it, like them, among all the children of the family... But when land was considered as the means, not of subsistence merely, but of power and protection, it was thought better that it should descend un-divided to one. In those disorderly times, every great landlord was a sort of petty prince. His tenants were his subjects. He was their judge, and in some respects their legislator in peace, and their leader in war. He made war according to his own discretion, frequently against his neighbours, and sometimes against his sovereign. The security of a landed estate, therefore, the protection which its owner could afford to those who dwelt on it, depended upon its greatness. To divide it was to ruin it, and to expose every part of it to be oppressed and swallowed up by the incursions of its neighbours. (WN III.ii.3, 383)

The argument is that the power vacuum left by the fall of Rome created conditions in which control over extensive areas of land became a necessity for competing feudal lords. Even when these lords were nominally subjects of a king, in fact, neither kings nor individual landlords had sufficient power to guarantee security of property to the inhabitants of the land. Instead, all of these landowners were constantly vying to maintain the security of their own situation, which meant maintaining the integrity of their estates by regulating inheritance according to the principal of primogeniture.<sup>118</sup>

Smith illustrates this problem by contrasting the geography of early feudal society to that of the classical republics of Greece and Italy. In the latter, the cities were composed “chiefly of the proprietors of lands, among whom the publick territory was originally divided, and who found it

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<sup>118</sup> From the latin *primogenitus*, meaning “first-born”.

convenient to build their houses in the neighbourhood of one another, and to surround them with a wall, for the sake of common defence” (WN III.iii.1, 397). By contrast, in feudal times “the proprietors of land seem generally to have lived in fortified castles on their own estates, and in the midst of their own tenants and dependants” (*ibid.*). In the early feudal period, the inhabitants of the towns in Europe were mostly tradesmen and were no better off, Smith suggests, than the serfs of the countryside, being in an essentially servile condition, with very few rights. In conducting their trade, these individuals had cause to move about, and were subject to various tolls and taxes as they journeyed from place to place. For particular reasons, an individual might be granted a personal exemption from such taxes by a king or a great lord who had sufficient power to do so, the enforcement of which was generally granted in exchange for the payment of an annual poll-tax<sup>119</sup>. As this custom developed, burghers themselves were frequently allowed to “farm”<sup>120</sup> the revenues from their own town, agreeing to make a fixed payment to the king or lord and taking on the labour of collecting the taxes from individuals in exchange for the possibility of profiting from surplus revenues (see WN III.iii.4, 399). As this system became more generalized, Smith suggests, such tax-farming arrangements, which were initially only granted for a limited number of years, were made perpetual, and what were originally only personal exemptions from the taxes imposed on travelling traders were thus extended to all inhabitants of such towns.

This shift was accompanied by the granting of various other important privileges to the inhabitants of the towns, including various rights concerning the family and personal property, the right to convene a town council, make bye laws and have magistrates, and the right to build defensive walls with the attendant right to submit the inhabitants of the town to a kind of military discipline which obliged each individual to contribute to its protection. Smith stresses the remarkable breadth of the concessions given by sovereigns, amounting to the creation of “a sort of independent

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<sup>119</sup> As an example, Smith notes how taxes of this kind were enumerated, albeit very imperfectly, in the Domesday book (see WN III.iii.2, 398).

<sup>120</sup> As was noted in the previous chapter, “farming”, etymologically, denotes a fixed payment. The connotation here is the same as in the use of the term, strictly applied, in relation to agriculture. Compared to systems in which produce or revenue is either simply expropriated by the lord, or divided according to set proportions, the setting of a fixed payment has two key advantages. Firstly, it eliminates the need for careful surveillance of production or revenue-collection by the receiver in order to assure that what is paid is actually proportional to what is gathered. Secondly, it provides an incentive to the payer not only to gather sufficient produce or revenue to cover the payment, but also to maximize this produce or revenue, since it is assured to them as profit. So long as there is sufficient trust between parties, therefore, farming reduces the labour involved in policing such an arrangement, whilst simultaneously incentivizing productivity.

republicks in the heart of their own dominions” (WN III.iii.7, 401), in exchange for a mere “rent certain” (WN III.iii.4, 399), which did not even make allowances for these rent payments to increase over time. The scale of these concessions he attributes to the extremely limited power of sovereigns in this period:

[I]t must be remembered, that in those days the sovereign of perhaps no country in Europe, was able to protect, through the whole extent of his dominions, the weaker part of his subjects from the oppression of the great lords. (WN III.iii.8, 401)

The privileges granted to the towns by the sovereigns, says Smith, combined with the wealth of the burghers attracted the continual envy of the great feudal lords who “plundered them [the towns] upon every occasion without mercy or remorse” (*ibid.*). At the same time, the power struggle between lords and their sovereigns therefore also created a ground of mutual interest on which pragmatic co-operation between kings and town dwellers could be built. This resulted in the formation of town militias to rival those of the country lords, which could, as necessary, be raised in support of the king.

To this depiction of a struggle for dominion between sovereigns and lords, Smith later adds an additional dimension, giving consideration to the role of the church:

In the antient state of Europe, before the establishment of arts and manufactures, the wealth of the clergy gave them the same sort of influence over the common people, which that of the great barons gave them over their respective vassals, tenants, and retainers. In the great landed estates, which the mistaken piety both of princes and private persons had bestowed upon the church, jurisdictions were established of the same kind with those of the great barons; and for the same reason. In those great landed estates, the clergy, or their bailiffs, could easily keep the peace without the support or assistance either of the king or of any other person; and neither the king nor any other person could keep the peace there without the support and assistance of the clergy. (WN V.i.g.22, 800-1)

Across Europe, Smith suggests, sovereigns already engaged in attempting to ensure the subordination of their own feudal lords also had to contend with the temporal power of a highly organized, pan-European church infrastructure. Whilst benefitting from the rents of their own estates, the church gathered further resources by the general enforcement of the tithe system, generating huge surpluses.<sup>121</sup> Like the feudal lords, the clergy were able to call on the tenants of

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<sup>121</sup> The term “tithe” derives from the old English for “tenth”. This was a form of tax enforced for a long time by the church, which demanded a tenth of the produce of land. As was noted in Chapter Four, Smith strongly disapproves of such taxes, both because they act as a disincentive to the cultivator, and because their enforcement creates problems of surveillance (see WN V.ii.e.3-7, 837-9).



their lands to fight when necessary. Unlike the lords, however, the clergy's power was not limited by the extent of their estates, or by the immediate resources they were able to draw in the form of tithes. Instead the centralization of authority in the figure of the Pope ensured, for several centuries, a network of power that extended across the countries of Europe, within which the clergy acted as a kind of "spiritual army" (WN V.i.g.21, 800), making it extremely perilous for any sovereign, whose material resources were ultimately limited to the retainers and produce of his demesne<sup>122</sup> lands, to challenge the authority of the church.

As Smith sees it, therefore, relations between sovereigns, feudal lords, and the church generated a geography of power in which kings sided pragmatically with the (primarily commercial) towns, whilst the (agricultural) countryside was dominated (the lands of the sovereigns excepted) by the dual powers of the feudal lords and the Catholic church. Smith sees this as having two main consequences. Firstly, the pact between sovereigns and the town dwellers generated a great inequality in the security of property. The density of inhabitation within towns, combined with the concessions, if not direct support, granted by sovereigns, allowed for the creation of a security of property that could not be replicated in anything like the same form in the countryside, where land was both the site and stake of conflict. Secondly, the profusion of great estates produced by these power struggles generated a pattern of land ownership which concentrated the control of large areas of land in the hands of a very small number of individuals. For Smith, both of these consequences contributed to a single overall effect, which was to create a general "discouragement" (see title of WN III.i) to agriculture, the primary industry of the countryside.<sup>123</sup>

Of course, the "disorder" (WN III.ii.3, 383) of feudal power struggles did not disrupt the agriculture of the countryside altogether.<sup>124</sup> On the contrary, agriculture was absolutely foundational to feudal society, both materially and socially. Cultivators formed a foundational stratum within the feudal system of rights and obligations, with these individuals paying "rents" in exchange for the supposed protection of their landlord. Originally rents took the form of various

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<sup>122</sup> The term "demesne" here denotes lands retained for the sole use of the landlord.

<sup>123</sup> This general assessment of mercantilist policy is one shared by Heckscher, who, like Smith, places emphasis on the town and country as representing an important regulatory divide (Heckscher 1994 [1931]).

<sup>124</sup> Indeed, feudalism seems to be in many places precisely the model for the agricultural, or "husbandry" stage of Smith's stadial history.

labouring duties including giving a portion of the produce of their cultivation to the landlord, or working, for a given period, the landlord's own demesne lands.<sup>125</sup> At many times, it was also the cultivators of land who personally had to provide military service when their landlord required (see WN V.i.a.5, 692). What interests Smith, however, is more specific. What is at stake through most of book III – as, indeed, is the case throughout the work – is an argument that links conditions of land tenure to the “improvement”<sup>126</sup> of land (or lack thereof). It is in this sense that Smith sees the industry of the countryside as having been discouraged in feudal Europe, not by a lack of labour employed in agriculture, but by a paucity of capitals generated by, and, in turn, invested in this activity.

This argument on the general discouragement to the industry of the countryside in feudal society has a number of parts, which it is worth reviewing briefly. The fragmentation of power, and resultant rivalry between king, feudal lords, and the church meant that all of these landlords were far more concerned with defending their own territories than with investing time and resources in pursuing the “small gains” (WN III.ii.7, 385) in productivity that characterize all kinds of improvements of land (improvements which may anyway not withstand the incursion of a rival militia). Simultaneously, the relative underdevelopment of manufacturing in the towns at this time also meant that these great landholders had little in the way of manufactured goods on which they could spend the surpluses generated by their lands. This limited possibility for accruing luxury goods meant that surpluses could, for the most part, be spent only on the hospitality afforded to their human retainers. This limited the incentives to generate additional surpluses and, therefore, provided a second disincentive towards improvement of land on the part of the landlords. Nor were incentives towards improvement any greater on the part of cultivators. Smith talks at length about the various arrangements (principally, serfdom) under which land was cultivated in Europe

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<sup>125</sup> This use of the term “rent” differs from the capitalistic rents that were discussed in Chapter Four. Such feudal rents did not necessarily follow the pattern of a fixed payment, and nor were they necessarily paid in monetary form. Etymologically, the word “rent” shares a root with the verb “render”, ultimately derived from the latin *reddere* (“to give back”). Tribe notes that these rents were originally attached to the individual, and were not conceived as a payment for any piece of land that they might have worked. Rents could therefore take the form of produce or services. It was only in later feudalism that the practice of commuting feudal obligations into monetary payments became more commonplace (see Tribe 1978).

<sup>126</sup> The notion of land “improvement”, which is absolutely central to the *Wealth of Nations*, was a much-discussed topic amongst the agricultural reformers of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see, for example, Tarlow, 2007). For Smith, such improvements take a variety of forms, including buildings, drainage, application of fertilizers, and other technical improvements, such as new crop rotations etc..

during feudal times. He concludes that the great juridical inequality between the cultivators and the various holders of land meant that not only did cultivators, in general, have no incentive to increase the capital they accumulated (including that which might be invested in the improvement of land), their powerlessness in relation to the great landholders meant that it was frequently safer *not* to be seen to be accumulating any surplus. As Smith says,

men in this defenceless state naturally content themselves with their necessary subsistence; because to acquire more might only tempt the injustice of their oppressors. (WN III.iii.12, 405)

These inequalities between landlords and cultivators were enshrined in law, through which landlords attempted to maintain their advantage.

The proprietors of land were antiently the legislators of every part of Europe. The laws relating to land, therefore, were all calculated for what they supposed the interest of the proprietor. (WN III.ii.16, 393)

However, in Smith's view, many of the attempts by landlords to promote their own interests above the rights of cultivators were short-sighted. Ultimately, the effect of these was to inhibit improvements to land, meaning, in turn, that the revenues generated by these lands remained well below what they might have reached had improvement been encouraged. As was noted in Chapter Four, Smith thinks that certain kinds of improvements can be made by tenants. In general these are short-term, technical improvements to the process of cultivation itself. But, given the right conditions, he suggests that these could include more long-lasting forms of improvement that increase the productivity of the land beyond the period of the tenancy. Key here is the length of tenancy: cultivators who have secure leases for a number of years, Smith suggests, have a greater incentive to use their own capital to improve the land they work (see WN III.ii.14, 391). In this respect he thinks that the laws of England, though only very slowly coming to ameliorate conditions for tenants, remain as yet the most favourable for tenants amongst the European powers, thus contributing significantly to the country's wealth.

There is, I believe, nowhere in Europe, except in England, any instance of the tenant building upon the land of which he had no lease, and trusting that the honour of his landlord would take no advantage of so important an improvement. Those laws and customs so favourable to the yeomanry, have perhaps contributed more to the present grandeur of England than all their boasted regulations of commerce taken together. (WN III.ii.14, 392)<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> A word here ought to be said about the term "yeoman". The early modern usage of the term yeoman refers to an

Over time, Smith suggests, the slow development of the commercial towns fundamentally changed the basis of feudal relations by providing new ways for the great proprietors to spend the surplus generated from their lands.

[W]hat all the violence of the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about. These gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their lands, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers. (WN III.iv.10, 418)

Meanwhile, he argues, the ascendancy of the rule of law – which meant that, now, “small as well as great estates derive their security from the laws of their country” (WN III.ii.6, 384) – rendered such large estates, whose size was premised on their defensibility, an anachronism. The accumulation of capitals in the towns, by manufacturers in particular, had generated a new class of small landowners as these individuals purchased small pieces of uncultivated land as investments. Nevertheless, in Smith’s day – as indeed remains the case today – vast areas of land in the United Kingdom remained in the control of the “great proprietors”. At numerous points through the work, Smith demonstrates his considerable hostility towards the persistence of these large estates, referring to the use of legal “entails” to restrict the inheritance of land to particular members of a family as “completely absurd” (WN III.ii.6, 384) in contemporary Europe. Again, the reason for this opposition is that, even in the absence of the insecurity generated by feudal rivalries, the great landlords seemed still ill-disposed to bring about the improvement of the land.

[t]here still remain in both parts of the united kingdom some great estates which have continued without interruption in the hands of the same family since the times of feudal anarchy. Compare the present condition of those estates with the possessions of the small proprietors in their neighbourhood, and you will require no other argument to convince you how unfavourable such extensive property is to improvement. (WN III.ii.7, 386)

What, then, does this historical detail add to our understanding of land considered through the register of property? The argument, suggesting as it does the “naturalness” of good government and security of property, and the “unnaturalness” of disorder, is clearly contestable. Nevertheless,

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individual who held land. But this could be based on a variety of forms of holding (free-, lease-, or copy-). Although a freehold today in common law is generally seen as synonymous with ownership of land itself, technically this is a form of estate. At the time Smith describes, this could be subject to the payment of an annual fee, and the yeoman remains a tenant of the lord or sovereign.

more than the content of the argument, it is the form that is of interest here. This again underscores the idea that property is the mediation of the relationship between humans and the earth.

## **Production, circulation, and market exchange**

In this section, I want to suggest that Smith's understanding of property is not incidental to the theoretical structure of *The Wealth of Nations*, but, rather, is integral to the analysis of market exchange – that is, what is commonly taken as the work's "economic" content – for which it is today most famously remembered. On one level, to say that such an analysis of market exchange presumes an understanding of property might seem facile. All accounts of market exchange must, at least implicitly, assume the existence of property relations. The point here is more specific, however. Whilst Smith's account of property relations specifically within capitalistic production is, in some respects, not more intricate than that which is implicit in Ricardo or subsequent political economy, the continuity of the analysis of production and market exchange with the natural (and indeed unnatural) histories of property is significant. The key point above has been to demonstrate that property is conceived not in terms of an abstract set of rights, but rather in terms of a set of institutions that mediate the relation between humans and the earth. Market exchange, as was suggested in the previous chapter, is therefore a subset of the broader field of material exchange which characterizes human subsistence on the earth.

I am not the first to note that Smith's analysis of market exchange rests on a conception of property. Indeed, nor is Smith the only author to whom this statement applies. J.G.A. Pocock, for example, suggests that the view of commerce that arose more broadly in the eighteenth century was one that imagined "a world of moving objects", premised upon the notion of an "exchange of forms of mobile property" (Pocock 1979, 147). In a somewhat related argument, Keith Tribe also suggests that processes of production in the eighteenth century were conceived in terms of personal wealth (Tribe 1978, 99). But here, I go beyond these kinds of argument to emphasize that the intricate relation between mobile property and land that was outlined above, continues to hold in Smith's account of market exchange. Indeed, more than this, this relationship is in fact

fundamental both to how Smith constructs his theory, and to the conclusions of the work as a whole.

As we saw above, in the *Lectures*, the continuity of questions of property and subsistence is seen most clearly in respect to the early stages of society, where the relation of human beings to the earth is a more direct one. In *The Wealth of Nations*, however, greater attention is paid to the mechanisms through which property operates in more developed societies, and particularly in the processes of production and market exchange. Here, property can be understood as falling under the categories of either “stock” or “land”, a distinction that follows the Roman law contrast between *res mobile* and *res immobile* (literally, moveable and immoveable things).<sup>128</sup> As the above discussion makes clear, this conceptual distinction is grounded, for Smith, in the historical development of property. But it retains its currency, in particular, by dint of the alignment of these categories with key nodes in the process of production that Smith sees as characterizing subsistence in societies based on agriculture.

For Smith, stock is essentially accumulated moveable property. As such, it is composed of physical goods which are, in turn, a store of past labour. The “natural” course of events determines that this should be used in order to facilitate further production.

As soon as stock has accumulated in the hands of particular persons, some of them will naturally employ it in setting to work industrious people (WN I.vi.5, 65).

Stock is described by Smith as an accumulation of goods that provide the subsistence of individuals either directly, or by furnishing materials that can be worked up into more refined goods and exchanged for subsistence items. The word, in Smith’s usage, overlaps with what is today the more familiar term, “capital”. When an individual has sufficient stock to maintain him, not only for a few days, but for many months or even years, he naturally thinks to put some of it to productive employment, in order that it may yield him a revenue.

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<sup>128</sup> Although the alignment of these concepts with Roman law categories is not explicitly expressed by Smith, on a number of occasions he references the mobility of property, for example in the distinction between land and moveables at II.ii.1, 382. Salter suggests that Smith’s *Lectures* clearly draw on Roman law, not only in the conceptual categories employed, but in the lines of reasoning he adopts to explain various aspects of property (Salter 2010). Again, this is seen to reflect the Grotian heritage in Smith’s jurisprudence. There seems no reason to think that a different conception of jurisprudence is at play in *The Wealth of Nations*. Though, of course, the discussion also importantly turns on a consideration of the United Kingdom, in which these Roman law categories are broadly paralleled by the common law distinction between “personal” and “real” property.

His whole stock, therefore, is distinguished into two parts. That part which, he expects, is to afford him this revenue, is called his capital. The other is that which supplies his immediate consumption; and which consists either, first, in that portion of his whole stock which was originally reserved for this purpose; or, secondly, in his revenue, from whatever source derived, as it gradually comes in; or, thirdly, in such things as had been purchased by either of these in former years, and which are not yet entirely consumed; such as a stock of cloaths, household furniture, and the like. In one, or other, or all of these three articles, consists the stock which men commonly reserve for their own immediate consumption. (WN II.i.2, 279)

Most commentators have ignored the term stock, treating it as straightforwardly coterminous with capital. Whilst the two are clearly related, and indeed are in certain cases treated by Smith as interchangeable, I want to suggest that, as concepts, these are somewhat distinct. “Stock” suggests the accumulation of physical resources, and is, as such, a resolutely material notion. “Capital” on the other hand seems to refer instead to a purely analytical principle. This describes that which either earns a profit, or – what amounts to the same thing for Smith – abridges labour (WN II.i.14, 282). Conceptually, it is directed towards identifying the sources of an individual’s “revenue”. Whilst stock refers to property in general, therefore, capital acts as a kind of accounting principle, identifying what part of this property constitutes a productive resource.

In II.i, Smith also introduces the now-familiar distinction between a fixed and a circulating capital. Fixed capital is that which “affords a revenue or profit without circulating or changing masters” (WN II.i.13, 282), such as machines, buildings, or improvements to land; circulating capital is, by contrast, that form of capital which “affords a revenue *only* by circulating or changing masters” (WN II.i.18, 282, my italics). Here, the notion of exchange in general is extended to one of the circulation of a product. Clearly drawing on the Physiocrats in this respect, but consistently with his more nuanced accounts of property and material exchange outlined here, Smith places the start and end points of this process in the procurement of the produce of the earth, and in agriculture in particular. In a fuller version of a quote already seen here in brief in Chapter Four, Smith states:

Land, mines, and fisheries, require all both a fixed and a circulating capital to cultivate them; and their produce replaces with a profit, not only those capitals, but all the others in the society. Thus the farmer annually replaces to the manufacturer the provisions which he had consumed and the materials which he had wrought up the year before; and the manufacturer replaces to the farmer the finished work which he had wasted and worn out in the same time. This is the real exchange that is annually made between those two orders of people, though it seldom happens that the rude produce of the one and the manufactured produce of the other, are directly bartered for one another... Land even

replaces, in part, at least, the capitals with which fisheries and mines are cultivated. It is the produce of land which draws the fish from the waters; and it is the produce of the surface of the earth which extracts the minerals from its bowels. (WN II.i.28, 284)

Capital here is a key facet of the process of circulation, which Smith, like the Physiocrats understands in terms of advances and revenues. Smith suggests that not only does the gathering of the resources of the earth (here separated into land-based production, extraction, and finishing) itself require a capital, but it is this process that restores the capitals required for these forms of industry, and indeed all others. In this sense, the earth is clearly the source of all capital, and of the three forms of procurement of the earth's resources mentioned here, the production of the surface of the earth – above all, agriculture – is seen as the most fundamental. It is in agriculture that a surplus is first produced, through the supplementation of human labour by that of nature, and it is this surplus which initiates the circulation of materials that simultaneously provides for the subsistence of society, and restores capitals.

What starts to become clear here is that stock and land are not the easily separable questions that a narrow focus on property *in* land might imply. Smith is aware that even the most rudimentary forms of agriculture require the prior accumulation of a stock. At its most basic level, this might be simply a stock of seeds required to sow a crop for the coming season along with the necessary implements of agriculture. But as was suggested in Chapter Three, Smith places great emphasis throughout the work on the question of land improvement, the central concern being how such improvement might come about. We saw in Chapter Four that “improvement”, for Smith, can denote simply the progressive extension of cultivation into what were previously wastes, and the subsequent specialization of land (what I termed the “division” of nature’s “labour”) towards the production of other goods, such as timber and animal products. However, the more specific use of the term refers in particular to various technical improvements to agriculture that require an investment of time and resources in the condition of the land itself.

The technological improvements discussed by Smith are of various forms. These include more short-term improvements such as manuring, and the development of more productive crop rotations, but also longer-term ones, such as drainage, the raising of hedges or walls, and the construction of buildings. For Smith, both short-term and long-term improvements require the



use of stock, but here, understanding the property relations involved in land tenure becomes of crucial importance. Smith recognizes three social classes, defined by their relations to the various forms of property involved: the owners of land, the owners of stock, and wage labourers.<sup>129</sup> These apply across all forms of industry in a commercial society, but it is in agriculture, and more specifically farming,<sup>130</sup> strictly speaking, that these property relations are given by far the most detailed consideration. The paradigmatic arrangement of cultivation is that of capitalistic tenant agriculture, and it is in reference to this model that Smith conducts the greatest part of his discussion of improvement. But in seeking to understand how improvement occurs, the key concern is that of the interests of the various parties involved. Of the three classes, agricultural wage labourers have no incentive to further the progress of improvement, since these have no property invested in the process of production. They are instead recompensed for their labour by wages that are assumed to be paid at more or less a subsistence level regardless of the condition of the land. Both landlords and tenants, however, do have an interest in the condition of the land, since its productivity affects their revenues. But the manner in which these revenues are affected is different in each case.

A farmer who leases land for a number of years has the incentive to maximize the exchangeable value of the goods he produces. He does this by applying his own fixed and circulating capitals in the process of production. The extent to which he is able to apply these depends in the first place

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<sup>129</sup> As embodied in individuals, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the owner of a capital, for example, might also separately hold land. Cultivation could also potentially be (and indeed in practice often was) carried out by an individual freeholder, in which case they would both own the land, and apply their own stock in the cultivation. Nevertheless, capitalistic tenant agriculture, in which these are distinct individuals remains the paradigmatic arrangement. Moreover, within any given individual project of industry, such as a farm or other business, these archetypal categories cover the property relations that might be involved in any particular form of industry undertaken.

<sup>130</sup> The word farm is today understood to derive from the latin *firmus*, implying something “fixed” or “constant”. Confusingly, in the *Lectures*, Smith provides an alternative etymology for “farm”, suggesting that this “signifies properly lands which paid victuals for their rent” based on a derivation from an unspecified old Saxon or Germanic word for victuals (LJ(A) i.19, 51). However, within *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith mostly uses the word “farming” to refer to the more usual sense of an arrangement based on the payment of a fixed rent by a tenant to a landlord. He is not entirely consistent, however, sometimes using the term “farmer” as interchangeable with the term “cultivator” (a distinction between which I attempt to maintain here). In book III, Smith includes a reference to “farmers properly so called, who cultivated the land with their own stock, paying a rent certain to the landlord” (WN III.ii.14, 391). This arrangement is contrasted to forms of cultivation under various kinds of feudal land tenure, which are discussed briefly in Chapter Five. The association of “farming” with fixed payments is further reinforced by Smith’s subsequent critical discussion of tax “farming” arrangements in France (WN V.ii.m.69, 900). Nevertheless, the whilst payments might be fixed, Smith nevertheless acknowledges the existence of rents paid in both coin and produce (WN I.v.13, 52).

on the amount of stock he has accumulated. But, beyond this the extent to which he is able to utilize this stock depends on his ability to cover the costs of production. These costs comprise his rent, any wages he pays to agricultural labourers, the cost of restoring his circulating capital, and the profits he expects to receive on the stock employed. For Smith, although these profits provide his income, they should not be conceived as a species of wages.

The profits of stock, it may perhaps be thought, are only a different name for the wages of a particular sort of labour, the labour of inspection and direction. They are, however, altogether different, are regulated by quite different principles, and bear no proportion to the quantity, the hardship, or the ingenuity of this supposed labour of inspection and direction. They are regulated altogether by the value of the stock employed, and are greater or smaller in proportion to the extent of this stock. (WN I.vi.6, 66)

Profits are thus determined by expectations of the usual profits of stock in a given place. That is to say, profits must take into account what the same value of stock, otherwise employed or invested in the same society, might be expected to return. As such, expected profits take the form of a proportion to the stock. Because of the fixity of his contract, a farmer has the incentive only to undertake those forms of improvement whose value can be recouped, with all of these costs taken into account, within the period of his tenancy. Whilst he has every incentive, therefore, to undertake those improvements such as manuring that will increase the value of the produce in the short term, he has no incentive to undertake more expensive and permanent forms of improvement whose costs may only be recouped over a period longer than his tenancy.

It is otherwise for the landlord. So long as the farmer maintains the condition of the soil, which, providing he has the sufficient stock (and especially livestock), it is anyway in his interest to do, the landlord has no immediate interest in the yield of the land during the period of the tenancy. His rents, the value of which are determined in advance by a contract agreed with the farmer, must be paid regardless of what the farmer actually manages to produce from the land during the tenancy period. Smith notes the inequality in this relationship between tenant and landlord, with the risk being solely on the part of the tenant. Rent, he notes,

is naturally a monopoly price. It is not at all proportioned to what the landlord may have laid out upon the improvement of the land, or to what he can afford to take; but to what the farmer can afford to give. (WN I.xi.a.5, 161)

This is a source of some confusion. Whilst long-term investments in the improvement of land, such as draining or new buildings are an investment of capital on the part of the landlord, his

returns in the form of the rents paid by his tenant do not follow the principle of proportionality which is held to govern the profits of stock in general (i.e. rents bear no fixed proportion to the value of the investment in them).

Rent, considered as the price paid for the use of land, is naturally the highest which the tenant can afford to pay in the actual circumstances of the land. In adjusting the terms of the lease, the landlord endeavours to leave him no greater share of the produce than what is sufficient to keep up the stock from which he furnishes the seed, pays the labour, and purchases and maintains the cattle and other instruments of husbandry, together with the ordinary profits of farming stock in the neighbourhood. (WN I.xi.a.1, 160)

Rents, therefore, are a residual – they constitute the remainder of the expected value of the produce after all the costs of the farmer have been covered. Whilst they bear no direct proportion to the value of the capital invested in the land, therefore, this does not mean that long-term improvements do not have any effect on the rental value. As Smith says elsewhere, rent can be understood,

as the produce of those powers of nature, the use of which the landlord lends to the farmer. It is greater or smaller according to the supposed extent of those powers, or in other words, according to the supposed natural or improved fertility of the land. It is the work of nature which remains after deducting or compensating every thing which can be regarded as the work of man. (WN II.v.12, 364)

Rental values are therefore determined ultimately by the exchangeable value of the goods that they produce. Improvements to land would thus be taken into account by the additional productivity above the “natural fertility” of the land, which would be expected to yield a greater produce.

Taken in isolation, the principles governing the rent of land – though of great interest to historians of economic thought – might seem somewhat arcane and tangential to the present concerns. Indeed, it is precisely when discussing in these very abstract and analytical terms how the composition of prices operates that Smith seems furthest away from the emphasis on the materiality of exchange that I am attributing to him in this chapter. Through this kind of analysis, the more anthropological account of property that I outlined earlier in this section might be seen to give way to a much more schematic analysis of individual interests. However, as we shift towards territory, I suggest that it becomes clear how this more abstract form of analysis is part of a strategy Smith uses to attempt to gain an understanding of processes of material development within a territory.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that property is a key part of the conceptual apparatus through which Smith understands land. Whilst clearly distinct from what I called Smith's "earth" register, what I have tried to show here is that the property register is nevertheless also continuous with the natural historical and material considerations that I suggested comprised the understanding of earth. As we saw in the first section, Smith's "natural history" of property consists in a kind of conjectural anthropology, in which claims of property are an inevitable consequence of the subsistence of humans on the earth. At each stage of societal development, property institutions emerge as a mediation of the material exchange with the earth, their naturalness, for Smith, consisting precisely in their ability to ensure the subsistence of the individuals within the society. Section two offered an alternative perspective on this argument by looking at the ills of an "unnatural" path of development in European feudal society. For the present purposes, the content of Smith's argument concerning the "naturalness" of good government and security of property, and the "unnaturalness" of disorder, which may well be contestable, is far less important than the way in which he reasons. Again, property is seen to be an eminently material consideration, here also modulated by concerns of spatiality and power. Furthermore, this discussion of the antagonism between the town and country highlights the key role of property in subsistence and wealth, and so its intimate connection to land. Finally, having established how Smith thinks about property, the third section emphasized the continuity of this line of reasoning with the analysis of market exchange within *The Wealth of Nations*. Rather than separate analyses, I suggest instead that the account of market exchange envisions this precisely as an exchange of property, and so presupposes the whole set of reflections about the way in which property mediates the relation between humans and the earth. Smith's comments make clear that land is integral to all processes of production and market exchange, not only through the provision of foodstuffs, but also through its central role in restoring the capitals that are essential to the subsistence of all societies with an advanced division of labour.

## 6 – Adam Smith IV: Land in the register of territory

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the third and final register in which I suggest Smith speaks of land in *The Wealth of Nations*, that of “territory”. In relation to the previous two registers, “earth”, and “property”, I suggested that although literatures have recognized the importance of Smith’s contribution to related debates, these two concepts have only very rarely been investigated in their own right within Smith’s work. This is undoubtedly connected to the broader neglect of land, the primary reason for which, I suggested in Chapter Three, is the historical and still persistent tendency to read the text through the lens of subsequent economics which no longer sees land as a central concern. This neglect is perhaps even more the case when it comes to territory. Whilst the territorial framing of much nineteenth century political economy (and indeed subsequent macro-economics) is implied by its focus on production and exchange at a national level, territory as a concept remains entirely unexamined within this tradition. As such, there has surely been little incentive, therefore, consideration of the concept by historians of thought. Territory, that is, is treated as an entirely unproblematic concept, a simple container for economic activity whose threshold indicates the border that goods must cross to be traded internationally, possibly being subject to the imposition of tariffs or bounties in the process.

On the face of it, there might seem to be little to challenge this view in Smith’s work. Nowhere within *The Wealth of Nations* does Smith directly question accepted understandings of what a territory is. Nor, in this case, are the *Lectures* particularly useful in indicating further underlying conceptual nuances. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that, to date, there is no literature, that I am aware of, that looks directly at Smith’s conception of territory. The closest existing literatures come to thinking about territory in Smith’s work is in the commentary on colonies. Smith’s views on colonies have long been of interest to historians of the British empire (Palen 2014; e.g. Knorr 2019 [1944]). In the history of political economy, many of the more historicist approaches have

acknowledged the importance of colonialism to eighteenth-century Scottish political economy as a whole (e.g. Winch 1965; Hont 1983; Pocock 2006), and, more recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Smith's views on colonies in particular, from a variety of perspectives (Ryan 2009; Clément 2014; Coyne and Hall 2014; Williams 2014; Simiqueli 2017; Stocker 2017). This commentary, however, has tended to focus on Smith's political opinions on the best way to deal with the contemporary problems in Britain's North American colonies, and the related issue of Smith's view that colonies constituted a cost rather than a benefit to the home country.

These are important issues for understanding Smith's views, and in what follows within this chapter, I pay attention to the specificity of colonial territory as opposed to the home territories of the colonial powers. Nevertheless, my interest here is more specifically in what territory is doing conceptually within *The Wealth of Nations*, and how this informs the understanding of land. This is something as yet not discussed within the literature. Here, in posing the question of territory as a concept, I am drawing in particular on the work of Stuart Elden. As was suggested in Chapter Two, Elden's work on territory informs the methodology adopted in this thesis, to the extent that it is broadly genealogical, whilst making use of a range of textual and contextual tools. In dealing directly with the concept of territory, however, the present chapter is able to draw on the more substantive content of this work. Elden's account of *The Birth of Territory* (2013b) makes clear that the modern concept of territory was well-established by the late eighteenth century. In this sense it is unsurprising both that Smith treats the term as fairly unproblematic, and that subsequent commentators have found little of interest in Smith's understanding of territory as a topic in its own right.

Nevertheless, Elden makes clear that, whilst the modern concept of territory may have been settled by the time Smith was writing, this is not to say that the ways in which the concept was employed did not continue to develop (2013b, 322). Moreover, what is most useful about this account for thinking about Smith's conception of territory, is that Elden encourages us to think of territory not in the sometimes overly simplistic way in which it is often conceived today, as simply the spatial extent of the state, but rather as what he terms a "bundle of political technologies" (*ibid.*). Looking at the history of territory, Elden emphasizes the importance of a range of juridical, technical, and calculative practices whose development was essential to the emergence of the

modern concept. Bringing this much more nuanced understanding of the nature of territory to bear in reading *The Wealth of Nations* is revealing. It foregrounds Smith's engagement with a range of legal and calculative practices associated with the state in relation to its territory. But more than this, it encourages us to reflect on the way in which Smith constructs his political œconomy as a calculative practice in its own right – one which undertakes what, borrowing from Foucault, we can call the “analysis of wealth” (Foucault 2002 [1966], ?) on the basis of strictly limited information.

In what follows, therefore, I consider the way in which territory (as both concept and a set of concrete practices) informs the concept of land within *The Wealth of Nations*. The argument here is continuous with that developed over the previous chapters. In Chapters Four and Five, I suggested that Smith's political œconomy can be understood as putting forward a theory of the material exchange initiated by the human relationship to the earth, and which is mediated by relations of property. Territory adds, as it were, another level to this mediation. The enforcement of borders, both for goods and people, taxation, and the legal framing of production, for example, all have an effect on these processes of material exchange. However, territory is not only significant to the extent that it has the potential to alter flows of materials. Perhaps the most fundamental facet of territory, from a discursive point of view, is that it defines an area from which taxation is drawn. Given the centrality of the question of state funding, seen in Chapter Three, it is possible to say that territory is a foundational facet of the discourse as a whole, constituting its epistemological standpoint. Political œconomy assumes what, borrowing from James Scott (1998), we might call the “gaze” of the state. In Smith's handling, this means looking at territory in terms of how necessary and already-occurring processes of material exchange, both internally to a given territory and between territories, might be harnessed in order to maximize a state's revenue.

The chapter consist of four sections. The first deals with the ways in which Smith uses the term territory. Here, interrogating the distinction Smith makes between home and colonial territories, I suggest that modern territories are understood as the source of state power, and that political œconomy, in treating the increase of this power as its aim, takes territory as its central object. Section two looks at how the theoretical structure of the work as a whole can be seen to derive from a set of questions around the mobilization of territorial resources by the state. Smith's

approach to these consists in enquiring into the nature of wealth and the agency of the “legislator” to effect its increase, placing great emphasis on land and its improvement. The third section looks at how Smith’s task of constructing a theoretical apparatus to understand wealth and mechanisms of its increase simultaneously involves an attempt to use changes in prices to “read off” conditions of land improvement within a territory, in the context of very limited information. Finally, I look at Smith’s account of the mobilization of wealth through taxation, showing how land and its condition are central concerns.

## **Territory: subsistence and authority**

Within *The Wealth of Nations*, the idea of territory is invoked relatively often, and in a variety of historical contexts, though Smith says relatively little that directly addresses the concept itself.<sup>131</sup> It seems clear from these numerous references here that territory implies some notion of control over an area of the earth. Sometimes this appears as control in a military sense,<sup>132</sup> but more commonly the association is with subsistence. Smith is fairly free with the use of the term, making reference to the idea in relation to all periods of his stadial history. As we saw in Chapter Four, for example, Smith thinks there is great difference between the number of hunters and the number of shepherds that the same extent of “fertile territory” can support (WN IV.vii.c.100, 634). But the most detailed analysis of territory is undoubtedly conducted in relation to the more specific sense of the territory of a modern state. Here, we can observe an important distinction between the home territories of sovereign states, and their colonial territories.

A fundamental aspect of all kinds of territory, for Smith, is that it is limited in extent. For a given mode of subsistence, therefore, there will always be a limit to the number of people to whom a given territory can provide subsistence. In the stages of society based on shifting habitation, this

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<sup>131</sup> This is perhaps simply because Smith took the concept to be relatively straightforward, and therefore requiring no further explanation. As was mentioned in Chapter Three, however, *The Wealth of Nations* was intended, with *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to form of triptych, the third, projected volume being on the “general principles of law and government” (TMS VII.iv.37). There is at least a possibility, therefore, that territory, like property, might have been something that Smith had intended to treat in greater detail in this unfinished volume, the notes for which are thought to have been destroyed on Smith’s death, at his instruction. This remains purely speculation, however.

<sup>132</sup> This is particularly the case in Smith’s account of the internal struggles of feudal society, a topic occupying most of book III, which was discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.



means that a territory might be exhausted of its capacity to supply subsistence for members of the society, forcing the community to move. In settled societies, however, territory, if not fixed, is necessarily immobile. Smith suggests that, through the history of settled societies, limitations of cultivable territory in the immediate vicinity have been the driving force for societies to seek new territories further afield, in the form of colonies. The ancient Greek city states, for example, formed colonies when their populations had grown too large to be supported by their limited territory:

when the people in any one of them [the city states] multiplied beyond what that territory could easily maintain, a part of them were sent in quest of a new habitation in some remote and distant part of the world (WN IV.vii.a.2, 556).

These Greek colonies were generally autonomous city states in their own right, and, as such, did not recognize the authority of the mother city. The impulse to create colonies in Roman times, Smith suggests, derived also from limitations of territory. But this was mediated through the demands of the agrarian law on which the Roman republic was founded. This was originally based on the assumption of a landholding citizenry, but had over time created a high concentration of land holdings and a large body of landless citizens who periodically made demands for land. The Roman solution, Smith says, was to assign lands in conquered provinces, which acted as a kind of garrison in these areas, but remained under the dominion of Rome. Thus, Greek and Roman colonies had a different character and motivation.

The words accordingly, which in the original languages denote those different establishments, have very different meanings. The Latin word (*Colonia*) signifies simply a plantation. The Greek word (*αποικια*), on the contrary, signifies a separation of dwelling, a departure from home, a going out of the house. (WN IV.vii.a.3, 558)

Whilst these driving factors were somewhat different, however, Smith argues that, in both the Greek and Roman cases, the creation of colonies was motivated by “irresistible necessity, or from clear and evident utility” (*ibid.*).

The suggestion is that, in Smith’s era, as the word itself suggests, *colonial* territories followed the Roman model, remaining the possessions of the mother country.<sup>133</sup> Yet, Smith suggests that the motivations for modern colonies have been somewhat different to those that drove the creation

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<sup>133</sup> Indeed, in reference to Britain’s North American territorial possessions, Smith seems to use the terms “colonies” and “plantations” somewhat interchangeably (e.g. WN IV.vii.b.42, 582).

of colonies in ancient societies. In the contemporary era, these derived, in the first instance, from jealousies of trade between states (for example the rivalry between Venice and Portugal), and from the over-inflated claims made by early colonists such as Columbus, who promised great bounties of mineral wealth, and exotic forms of plant and animal life in order to justify their own projects (WN IV.vii.a.14, 561). Smith does not entirely deny that there might have been significant benefits drawn from the colonies of European states since this time, but says that these are “not... so clear and evident” (WN IV.vii.a.3, 558) as they are commonly supposed to be. As various commentators have noted, Smith’s implicit preference was for the Greek model, the suggestion being, as Jonsson puts it, that, “British settlements overseas should be treated as embryonic metropolises” (Jonsson 2010, 1355).

In terms of *how* territory comes to be claimed, Smith is not always clear. In the case of ancient city states, the discussion emphasizes more the direct use and occupation of the land. It is not always the case, however, that territory implies use. Whilst the demands of subsistence grant a necessity to the occupation of a certain extent of territory, control over a portion of the earth is ultimately a consideration of power. Unlike property, Smith’s comments on territory in the *Lectures* do not extend far beyond what is found within *The Wealth of Nations*. Nevertheless, where territory is discussed here, it is clear that this is a military-strategic matter above all else. Implicit in Smith’s discussion of territory in both is an acknowledgement that states have, historically, and to varying extents, claimed as territory lands that were not directly occupied – the most extravagant case being the claim of the Spanish to the whole of the Americas on their discovery by the early European colonists at the end of the fifteenth century (WN IV.vii.b.9, 569). Smith also acknowledges that all modern projects of empire rest on a foundation of military power, pre-supposing a standing army. This,

establishes, with an irresistible force, the law of the sovereign through the remotest provinces of the empire, and maintains some degree of regular government in countries which could not otherwise admit of any. (WN V.i.a.40, 706)

Territory is therefore not simply a matter of the gradual expansion of settled societies, according to the demands of their subsistence. It is instead an interplay of these demands of subsistence, and the military-strategic ambitions of their rulers.

It is true that much of the theoretical work of the text takes the problem of military control largely for granted. Yet this does not mean that questions of power disappear entirely. As the title of the work clearly indicates, the central focus of the text is wealth, or, more precisely, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Smith is clear, though, that wealth remains ultimately a strategic question:

The riches, and so far as power depends upon riches, the power of every country, must always be in proportion to the value of its annual produce, the fund from which all taxes must ultimately be paid. But the great object of the political œconomy of every country, is to encrease the riches and power of that country. (WN II.v.31, 372)

So the problem of state power is displaced to what, following Foucault, we can call the “analysis of wealth” (2002 [1966]). Wealth, properly speaking, therefore, is a facet of a territory. This point might seem banal. A similar focus on the wealth of a country is common to all the discourses of Foucault’s “analysis of wealth”, and territory provides at least the implicit container for this wealth. But what I want to suggest here is that Smith takes the connection between wealth and territory very seriously. This is both through the emphasis he places on the foundation of societal wealth in land, and, relatedly, the way in which he sets up his political œconomy to investigate this.

## **The theoretical role of territory**

In spite of the fact that Smith has been so rarely recognized as a thinker of territory, I want to suggest here that *The Wealth of Nations* as a whole is framed above all as an account of territorial development. It is helpful to remember, as we also saw in Chapter Three, that the addressee of the work is the figure of the “legislator”, an imagined enlightened law-maker, who is to understand the interests of the state in relation to general principles of the kind Smith sees himself as outlining. The whole analysis must be understood in relation to the agency of this statesman, and this is an agency importantly directed towards a territory. The content of Smith’s political œconomy can therefore be understood as a response to a series of questions regarding the relationship between wealth and territory.

Most fundamentally, the question posed is, given a certain extent of territory, how can its wealth be maximized to the benefit of the state? This question has a number of parts. Firstly, the true

nature of wealth must be established. The next step is to ask what agency the state has to increase this wealth. Smith, however, is clear that national wealth does not automatically translate into resources of the state. A third distinct question, therefore, is how such wealth might be mobilized, principally through taxation, to the benefit of the state, without stifling the processes that give rise to wealth. A final question, overarching these, is a more epistemological one. It concerns the state's knowledge of the development of wealth within its territory, how this knowledge is gained, and what are its limits.

As was seen in Chapter Four, Smith insists frequently through the text that the “real wealth” of a country consists in, “the annual produce of its land and labour” (e.g. WN I.xi.m.9, 258). This is a claim that he continues to develop throughout the work. Essential to the theoretical justification for this is the notion of “productivity”.<sup>134</sup>

There is one sort of labour which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is bestowed: There is another which has no such effect. The former, as it produces a value, may be called productive; the latter, unproductive labour. (WN II.iii.1, 330)

Unproductive activities include, for Smith, a wide variety of employments, including, for example, that of menial servants (in fact, domestic labour in general), physicians, men of letters, and clergymen. Above all, perhaps, are the various forms of work undertaken by the state, including the administration of defence, justice, and any public works unlikely to be undertaken by individuals for profit. The key factor is whether the labour yields a physical product with a value. Productive labour, thus, is that which,

fixes and realizes itself in some particular subject or vendible commodity, which lasts for some time at least after that labour is past (*ibid.*)<sup>135</sup>

As we also saw in Chapter Four, Smith makes an argument for the specificity of agriculture by positing that it is in agriculture alone that “nature labours along with man” (WN II.v.10, 363). Here, says Smith, the role of the farmer is to “direct the fertility of nature” (*ibid.*). As Raimund

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<sup>134</sup> Hont and Ignatieff (2010 [1983]) suggest that the question of how a limited amount of productive labour could sustain such a large unproductive sector of the population was at the heart of contemporary debates about the nature of “commercial society”. It was this, above all, they suggest, that prompted the comparative reflections upon the nature of subsistence within the stadial historical thesis.

<sup>135</sup> Schabas (2003, 272) emphasizes the novelty of Smith's view. Locke's idea of “mixing” labour in relation to the creation of property rights, and also Hume's conception of labour as purely able to alter goods, did not contain the notion of labour as an alienable “stuff” that could be packed into objects.

Bleischwitz (2001, 25) notes, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is one that Smith adopts from the Physiocrats. However, whereas the Physiocrats saw the sole source of productivity in agriculture, contrasting this to “sterile” manufacturing, Smith argues that manufacturing too, and commerce are also forms of productive labour. Smith’s deviation from the physiocrats is only partial, however. The products of land are still understood as the source of both the materials and the subsistence that manufacturers require to produce their goods (and which merchants can then sell), and, for Smith, thus, priority remains firmly with agriculture. But the distinctiveness of Smith’s argument consists in a claim regarding the division of labour. The labour of the manufacturer or the merchant,

contributes... indirectly to increase the produce of the land. It increases the productive powers of productive labour, by leaving it at liberty to confine itself to its proper employment, the cultivation of land; and the plough goes frequently the easier and the better by means of the labour of the man whose business is most remote from the plough. (WN IV.ix.15, 669)

Non-agricultural labour, therefore, is productive, but *only* insofar as it increases the productivity of agricultural labour.

This argument about the productivity of labour spawns the idea of a hierarchy of the employments of capital. Smith outlines four categories of “productive” industry, which are, in order of decreasing productivity: procuring raw materials, manufacturing and preparing rude produce, transportation, and dividing into smaller portions to suit the demands of buyers (retailing) (WN II.v.1, 360).<sup>136</sup> But this purely analytical argument develops in book III into the notion of a natural temporal sequence.<sup>137</sup> Smith creates, in effect, a subsidiary stadial theory, though one not connected to the main stadial history, which, as we have seen, is centrally concerned with modes of subsistence. Here, he argues that the sequential employment of capital in agriculture,

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<sup>136</sup> This has received some critical commentary amongst historians of economic thought. Hollander (2019 [1973], 277), for example, talks of this as Smith’s “analysis of investment priorities”: “The establishment of a hierarchy of sectors... is in sharp conflict with the fundamental argument of the First Book according to which an optimum allocation of resources is achieved when profit rates - subject to risk and non-monetary differentials - are everywhere equalized.” Hollander, however, fails to consider that Smith’s account of productivity rests on an insistence that the priority of agriculture derives from its capacity to furnish physical materials, in the form of foodstuffs and other “rude produce”. Hollander, instead, adopts a more Ricardian perspective (discussed in Chapter Seven), in disavowing the significance of this physicality. It is worth noting that Smith’s perspective is a sociological one – or, more precisely, as argued here, a territorial one. He is concerned with the nature of subsistence and associated flows of materials. Hollander adopts the perspective of a narrower focus on exchange values.

<sup>137</sup> Or, the “natural progress of opulence”, as Smith refers to this sequence in the title of III.i.

manufacturing, and carriage, in fact, constitutes the “natural” pattern of development within a territory.

Having established this idea of a natural sequence, however, Smith then proceeds to argue that this was not the path taken in Europe. Rather, development in European nations followed an “unnatural and retrograde order” (WN III.i.8, 380). In the first place, as discussed in Chapter Five, this was because the disorder and insecurity of property under European feudal society generated a geography of power that stalled the development of agriculture in the countryside whilst encouraging the commerce and manufacturing of the towns. Subsequently, even with the rise of modern states and the resulting increase in the security of property, the mercantilist focus of state policy had continued to privilege commerce and manufacturing above all else. This subordinated the industry of the countryside to the needs of the towns through measures such as price restrictions on agricultural goods.<sup>138</sup> Smith’s reading of physiocracy posits this as reaction against mercantilism’s insistence on privileging theoretically the industry of the town over that of the country. In this respect the physiocratic system represents, for Smith, almost an exact inversion of mercantilist principles, emphasizing the importance of agriculture at the expense of manufactures, and is as such an over-compensation for the failures of mercantilism (WN IV.ix.4, 664). Nevertheless, whilst theoretically flawed, Smith endorses the physiocrats’ emphasis on a *laissez-faire* approach to the regulation of industry.

The model example for the “natural” pattern of territorial development is therefore provided not by any of the home territories of the European powers, but by that of Britain’s North American colonies. As Smith says,

Compare the slow progress of those European countries of which the wealth depends very much upon their commerce and manufactures, with the rapid advances of our North American colonies, of which the wealth is founded altogether in agriculture. (WN

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<sup>138</sup> Smith takes as exemplary the policies of the seventeenth-century French minister of finances, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (WN IV.ix.2, 663). Although Smith expresses this in largely theoretical terms, Hont and Ignatieff (Hont and Ignatieff 2010 [1983]) have demonstrated that Smith’s commentary on the town and country division comes in the context of a set of debates around the regulation of the grain trade. This was a highly political issue, especially in France, and formed the background also to Physiocratic theories. The debate centred around the need to ensure subsistence in times of dearth, via a complex system of police, versus the benefits of a free market in grain, which might boost productivity and thus avoid the problem of dearth altogether. This is a debate Foucault also pays attention to in one of the rare places where he discusses land and agriculture, in relation to notions of security, territory, and population (Foucault 2009 [1977–1978]).

III.iv.19, 422-3)

North America, with its abundance of uncultivated land,<sup>139</sup> unencumbered by the impediments of a feudal past, is seen to provide the conditions for an increase in wealth far more rapid than any seen in European history since the fall of Rome. Smith uses this as evidence to support his hypothesis that allowing the employments of capital to follow their natural sequence will lead to the most rapid development of territorial wealth.<sup>140</sup>

With this reasoning, Smith argues that the attention of the legislator should thus be turned towards the promotion of agricultural development within the territory. But this should not be attempted by efforts to regulate industry. As we will see below, the agency of the statesman is supposed to lie more narrowly in the legal framing of production, and in the ways in which taxes are raised. Rather, industry should be allowed to follow its “natural course” (WN III.iv.14, 421), through the lifting of restrictions on both the industries of the town and the country.

Whilst Smith presents these arguments in largely in dispassionate, theoretical terms, Hont and Ignatieff (2010 [1983]) make clear that the issues at stake were in fact highly political. At stake was the question of the “police” of the grain trade. At the time Smith was writing, the recurrent problem of dearth continued to provide key problems of policy for the European powers. As E. P. Thompson argues, food shortages were a continual issue in England through the eighteenth century, leading to frequent “risings of the poor” (Thompson 1991, 189). On these occasions, where magistrates failed to enforce traditional paternalist regulations allowing provisions to be distributed to the poor, crowds would frequently break open granaries and distribute grain, setting the price at a “popular” level. In this sense, he suggests, Smith’s was an idealized system, rather

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<sup>139</sup> Of course, in many cases, though land in North America might have been uncultivated, it was not necessarily unoccupied, prior to the arrival of the colonists. Elsewhere, Smith notes the “savage injustice” (WN IV.i.32, 448) committed by Europeans against the original peoples of the colonies.

<sup>140</sup> Smith could of course be critiqued according to the terms of his own arguments here. We saw in the previous chapter the “natural” pattern of development of property relations put forward in the stadial thesis. But this is short-circuited in the case of territories acquired by colonialism. As opposed to property institutions evolving organically, in response to the evolving relationship between the extent of territory and population, the colonial model assumes the radical imposition of the institutions of a commercial society in a context in which they did not evolve organically. Therefore, whilst in the North American colonies the sequence of employments of capital might be in some sense “natural”, according to Smith’s own sociology (and indeed according to his own preference for the Greek treatment of colonies) this would seem to be a fairly unnatural development in most other respects. At no point does Smith address this clear tension, however.

than a reflection of what actually happened with changes in prices. Hont and Ignatieff, however, suggest that the more influential context for Smith might have been the food crises of 1764-66 during his time in France. Smith sided with the Physiocrats in emphasizing the gains to productivity from allowing the price of food to find its “natural” level.

As problematic as the reality of a free trade in foodstuffs might have been, the more empirical part of Smith’s analysis takes this assumption as foundational. A key premise of this analysis is that subsistence is, for the most part, drawn from within the territory. This is seen most clearly in Smith’s discussion of the town and country distinction, which, as we saw in Chapter Four, has its basis in the spatiality of land use.

The great commerce of every civilized society, is that carried on between the inhabitants of the town and those of the country. It consists in the exchange of rude for manufactured produce... The country supplies the town with the means of subsistence, and the materials of manufacture. The town repays this supply by sending back a part of the manufactured produce to the inhabitants of the country. The town, in which there neither is nor can be any reproduction of substances, may very properly be said to gain its whole wealth and subsistence from the country. (WN III.i.1, 377)

Smith does discuss instances of nations who have prospered when their populations have grown “so populous, that the whole territory... has not been sufficient to produce both the grass and the corn necessary for the subsistence of their inhabitants”, the principal historical examples being ancient Rome and contemporary Holland (I.xi.b.12, 166). However, this is seen as the exception, and not as a general model of development capable of acting as a guide to political œconomy.

According to the standard model of territorial development, therefore, whilst a paucity of stock might hinder the improvement of land and the expansion of population, it is the extent of available land that acts as a final limiting factor. A country can therefore be “fully peopled in proportion to what either its territory could maintain or its stock employ” (WN I.ix.14, 111); similarly, a territory might also come to be “fully stocked in proportion to all the business it had to transact” (WN I.ix.14, 111). Whilst the availability of land provides a crucial limiting factor in the accrual of riches, there is a suggestion that this limit is nevertheless a contingent one, hingeing as it does on the mediation of subsistence by social institutions. Smith refers, for example, to China as having acquired, already several centuries before, “that full complement of riches which the nature of its



laws and institutions permits it to acquire” (WN I.viii.24, 89).<sup>141</sup>

According to this analysis, the condition of being “fully peopled” or “fully stocked” is necessarily also one of maximal production. This implies the fullest use of territorial resources. Of the two variables in the land-population-stock nexus, population is of course important as the source of productive labour, but the legislator has little agency to affect this in any direct manner. Rather his attention must be directed above all to the accumulation of stock, and the capitals that this provides for the mobilization of productive industry.

A particular country, in the same manner as a particular person, may frequently not have capital sufficient both to improve and cultivate all its lands, to manufacture and prepare their whole rude produce for immediate use and consumption, and to transport the surplus part either of the rude or manufactured produce to those distant markets where it can be exchanged for something for which there is a demand at home. (WN II.v.18, 365)

The condition of agricultural land is again central here. The investment of capitals in land is seen as a necessary precursor to maximizing the production of the territory as a whole. The progressive increase of wealth is therefore signalled by the progressive improvement of land. This is not an open-ended process, however, but one that has its end point in the “complete improvement and cultivation of the country” (WN I.xi.k.12, 245).

## **An empirical account of territory**

We have established that the accrual of wealth consists, for Smith, in the maximization of the productive resources of a territory – that is, in the growth of its population and stock, and in the improvement of its lands. For Smith, it is the job of the legislator to encourage and facilitate this process of development through the means available to the state. This intervention must be guided by an accurate assessment of the current state of national wealth. Such an assessment, however, presents a number of significant epistemological problems. In this section I look at how Smith’s effort to theorize the nature of wealth and the mechanisms of its increase simultaneously involves an attempt to use this theoretical apparatus to undertake an empirical assessment of territorial

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<sup>141</sup> As we have seen above and in previous chapters, this idea of the contingency of limits to population is one that is an important aspect of Smith’s stadial history.

development in various contexts. This empirical aspect of Smith's approach helps, in turn, to buttress his theoretical claims, but, at the same time, it appears to be a genuine attempt to fill in gaps in contemporary knowledge.

Smith wrote in an era where available information on the processes he describes was extremely limited. Estimations of population, for example, were highly imperfect, an official census not being introduced in Britain until 1801, with a systematic assessment of the condition of land being introduced also only in the first decades of the nineteenth century (see Hacking 1991).<sup>142</sup> Moreover, Smith does not only seek to analyse contemporary circumstances, nor does he restrict himself solely to the familiar context of Britain. Rather his is an attempt at a globe-spanning analysis, trying to reconstruct and account for long-term trends in demography, and in the condition of land. As such he draws on a diverse range of sources to evidence his arguments, from ancient writers such as Aristotle and Pliny, through Marco Polo's account of medieval China and the historical records of Eton College, to more contemporary accounts from the colonies such as those of the Spanish general Antonio de Ulloa and natural historians such as Pehr Kalm.<sup>143</sup> Smith draws a range of information from these sources concerning conditions of development in various contexts. But the central thread of this analysis consists in the reconstruction of long-term price trends, with a view to understanding what these indicate about conditions within the territories he considers. The way he does this hinges on the account of land use change that was examined in Chapter Four. As we saw, this goes beyond a simple model of the progressive extension of cultivation. Instead, Smith looks at the dynamics of land use change as a result of the effects of extended cultivation on the availability of other subsistence goods, particularly through the diminution of the "spontaneous productions" of the soil from waste lands. Within a given territory, the loss of wastes will decrease the supply of those goods that wastes provide, and therefore increase their price.

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<sup>142</sup> Less than a century earlier, William Petty, of whose political arithmetic Smith seems well aware, was still attempting to derive estimates of population in England and the world as a whole from biblical records (see Birch *et al.* 1759). Attempts to measure population in the eighteenth century were somewhat more systematic, but still these were extremely patchy and unreliable. Smith was a correspondent of Sir John Sinclair who is credited with the first use of the term "statistics" in English, his *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* beginning in 1791. These *Accounts* covered geography and topology, population, and agricultural and industrial production (see Sinclair 1791). Interestingly, the *Accounts* of 1791-99 were subsequently supplemented by a volume by Sinclair on cattle (Sinclair 1802).

<sup>143</sup> For a detailed contextual account of Smith's engagement with contemporary botanists, and the colonial context in which this took place, see Jonsson (2010, 2013).

But attempting, in this way, to “read off” conditions of territorial development from an analysis of prices raises the problem of the commensurability of prices in the short and long term. Smith’s consideration of this comes in the lengthy “Digression concerning the Variations in the Value of Silver during the Course of the Four last Centuries” (I.ix.e-m). In this passage, Smith argues that, although precious metals provide a good indicator of prices in the short term, in the long term, variations in the supply of these metals – drawn as they were from the mines of South America – have meant that they are unreliable as standards against which to judge variation in the price of goods over the kind of longer periods that an assessment of the progress of improvement would require. Instead, throughout the work, Smith treats corn as a much more reliable standard for measurement, since corn, though exhibiting short-term fluctuations in exchange value, has an essentially stable use value, as the basis of the subsistence of most individuals. As he states elsewhere,

Equal quantities of labour will at distant times be purchased more nearly with equal quantities of corn, the subsistence of the labourer, than with equal quantities of gold and silver, or perhaps of any other commodity. (I.v.15, 53)

More pragmatically, he further notes that the prices of corn,

though they have in few places been regularly recorded, are in general better known and have been more frequently taken notice of by historians and other writers. (I.v.22, 55)<sup>144</sup>

It is not the monetary value of corn in itself, then, that Smith is interested in since this measure relies on the stability of the prices of precious metals. Instead it is the *relative* price of corn in comparison to other key goods that Smith thinks can provide a good indicator of the increasing wealth of a country. The following passage, from the conclusion of the digression, is indicative of the concerns motivating the discussion:

[T]hough the low money price either of goods... be no proof of the poverty or barbarism of the times, the low money price of some particular sorts of goods, such as cattle, poultry, game of all kinds, &c. in proportion to that of corn, is a most decisive one. It clearly demonstrates, first, their great abundance in proportion to that of corn, and consequently the great extent of the land which they occupied in proportion to what was occupied by corn; and, secondly, the low value of this land in proportion to that of corn land, and consequently the uncultivated and unimproved state of the far greater part of the lands of the country. It clearly demonstrates that the stock and population of the

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<sup>144</sup> I.xi.e sees Smith engaging with a number of historians in detail in relation to grain prices within the United Kingdom. He also draws on his own analysis of the records of Eton College.

country did not bear the same proportion to the extent of its territory, which they commonly do in civilized countries, and that society was at that time, and in that country, but in its infancy. (WN I.xi.m.4, 256-7)

This passage, which is only one of a number of examples of this line of reasoning through the work, clearly demonstrates Smith's belief in the possibility of "reading off" conditions of territorial development from the available price information. As such, it simultaneously emphasizes the centrality of the question of territorial development within the construction of the work as a whole. As was suggested in Chapter Three, one of the key over-arching arguments throughout the work is the rejection of a "mercantilist" focus on the accrual of gold and silver. For Smith, to focus political economy on this goal is to neglect entirely the development of the real resources of a country, chasing instead one particular commodity which directly sustains no individual, and whose value, therefore, is defined solely by its chance distribution within the "intractable substances" of the earth (WN IV.vii.a.19, 563).

The fertility or barrenness of the mines... which may happen at any particular time to supply the commercial world, is a circumstance which, it is evident, may have no sort of connection with the state of industry in a particular country. It seems even to have no very necessary connection with that of the world in general. (WN I.xi.l.21, 254)

The efforts of the legislator are therefore best directed towards the development of those territorial resources that it is within the power of human agency to increase.

The lands of no country, it is evident, can ever be compleatly cultivated and improved, till once the price of every produce, which human industry is obliged to raise upon them, has got so high as to pay for the expence of compleat improvement and cultivation... This rise in the price of each particular produce, must evidently be previous to the improvement and cultivation of the land which is destined for raising it. (WN I.xi.k.12, 245)

A rise in the price of particular goods, therefore, is not necessarily something to be feared, but rather something that the legislator must eye as a potential indication of growing wealth within the territory.

The real wealth of the country, the annual produce of its land and labour, may... be either gradually declining... or gradually advancing... But if this rise in the price of some sorts of provisions be owing to a rise in the real value of the land which produces them, to its increased fertility; or, in consequence of more extended improvement and good cultivation, to its having been rendered fit for producing corn; it is owing to a circumstance which indicates in the clearest manner the prosperous and advancing state of the country. The land constitutes by far the greatest, the most important, and the most

durable part of the wealth of every extensive country. It may surely be of some use... to have so decisive a proof of the increasing value of by far the greatest, the most important, and the most durable part of its wealth. (WN I.xi.m.9, 258)

## **Land and the mobilization of territorial wealth through taxation**

This more empirical part of Smith's analysis both relies on, and simultaneously seeks to provide evidence for, the more theoretical account of territorial development found in the work. As was suggested above, however, how a state facilitates the process of the development of wealth within a territory, and how, in turn, it can harness this wealth to its own benefit, remain distinct questions. In the latter part of the work, Smith gives detailed consideration to the ways in which states have sought to regulate commerce and industry to their benefit. This includes, for example, the practice of restricting certain trades from the colonies to the market of the mother country through the system of "enumerated commodities" (e.g. WN IV.vii.b.35, 579), the complex provincial rules regulating internal commerce in France (WN V.ii.m.69, 900), and the "burdensome and oppressive restrictions" (WN IV.viii.21, 649) imposed on the movement of goods in order to prevent smuggling in the United Kingdom. Smith is highly critical of any unnecessary restrictions to trade, however, arguing instead for what he calls a "system of natural liberty" (WN IV.ix.51, 687). He proposes that rather than trying to force the industry of the country to follow a particular path, the state should relax these kinds of restrictions and foster human industry in general by allowing it to follow its natural path of development. The power of the state could then rest on a revenue obtained simply by a prudent taxation of the commerce of its territory, in a manner that permitted for the continued development of its resources.

Here again, Smith comes back to land, suggesting that this remains the foundation of national wealth. He suggests that there are three possible sources of tax revenue: the wages of labour, the profits of stock, and the rent of land. Any taxes on the wages of labour, direct or otherwise, are swiftly dismissed. These, Smith argues, do not actually fall on labourers themselves, but on those who pay their wages.

If direct taxes upon the wages of labour have not always occasioned a proportionable rise in those wages, it is because they have generally occasioned a considerable fall in the demand for labour. The declension of industry, the decrease of employment for the poor,

the diminution of the annual produce of the land and labour of the country, have generally been the effects of such taxes. (WN V.ii.j.3, 865)

Taxes on labour therefore act, by proxy, as taxes on stock. These are detrimental to the development of wealth since they act as a disincentive to industry. Stock's "unstable and perishable nature" (WN V.ii.b.12, 820) means that it can be eroded by placing on it the burden of state funding.

The proprietor of stock is properly a citizen of the world, and is not necessarily attached to any particular country. He would be apt to abandon the country in which he was exposed to a vexatious inquisition, in order to be assessed to a burdensome tax, and would remove his stock to some other country where he could, either carry on his business, or enjoy his fortune more at his ease." (WN V.ii.g.6, 848-9)

By contrast,

Land is a fund of a more stable and permanent nature; and the rent of publick lands, accordingly, has been the principal source of the publick revenue of many a great nation that was much advanced beyond the shepherd state. From the produce or rent of the publick lands, the ancient republicks of Greece and Italy derived, for a long time, the greater part of that revenue which defrayed the necessary expences of the commonwealth. The rent of the crown lands constituted for a long time the greater part of the revenue of the ancient sovereigns of Europe. (WN V.ii.b.13, 821)

Historically, Smith says, the revenues from public lands alone had been sufficient to cover the entire expense of the sovereign. But the cost of government under modern commercial society – and most significantly the cost of a professional standing army (see WN V.i) – makes such revenues entirely insufficient for a modern state. Indeed, Smith suggests that such were the expenses of the modern state that even the entirety of the rents of the whole country might be insufficient to defray the cost of government if these were left in an unimproved state. Here he levels criticism in particular at the remaining large feudal estates, whose size, he thinks, mitigates against the kind of attention to small gains on the part of the proprietor that smaller landowners naturally pay to their land (WN V.ii.b.16, 822).

What is needed, therefore, is a system of taxation of land that allows for improvement. Taxes on the rent of land, rather than its produce, is Smith's preferred mode of taxation.<sup>145</sup> He

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<sup>145</sup> The tithing system used by the church, for example, which is based on a proportion of the produce, is heavily criticized: "The tythe, as it is frequently a very unequal tax upon the rent, so it is always a great discouragement both to the improvements of the landlord and to the cultivation of the farmer. The one cannot venture to make the most important, which are generally the most expensive improvements; nor the other to raise the most valuable, which are

wholeheartedly approves of taxation of the rent of houses. More specifically, he thinks the portion of money paid to the landlord that is “ground rent” (rather than a rent paid for the use of the building sited on the land) is a subject even more suitable for taxation than the rent of agricultural land, since the value being captured here cannot ever be said to have been augmented by the landlord’s own investments in improvement (as might be the case, instead, for agricultural land) (WN V.ii.f.11, 844).<sup>146</sup> It is the rent of productive land, however, that receives by far the most attention. The central issue here is the extent to which a tax tracks changes in the value of rent over time. Smith criticizes the English system whereby land taxes are pre-determined per region, and do not track changes in value:

“A land tax which, like that of Great Britain, is assessed upon each district according to a certain invariable canon, though it should be equal at the time of its first establishment, necessarily becomes unequal in process of time, according to the unequal degrees of improvement or neglect in the cultivation of the different parts of the country... As the tax upon each district does not rise with the rise of the rent, the sovereign does not share in the profits of the landlord’s improvements.” (WN V.ii.d.2, 828)

Smith, though disagreeing with their reasoning, concurs in principal with the proposals put forward by the Physiocrats that land taxation should track changes in rental value (WN V.ii.d.7, 830), the reasoning behind this being that taxation should aim to capture the increases in value brought about by improvement of land within its territory. In relation to this desire, Smith puts forward some detailed practical proposals. He suggests that all land lease contracts should be held in a public record. Fines should be imposed on contracts renewed at the same rental value, in order to incentivize landlords to make an accurate assessment of present conditions. These contracts, however, should be made to renew not yearly, but on a fixed period of several years, so that tenants wanting to make improvements themselves would be incentivized by the prospect of reaping the reward until the next renewal period. Smith sums up his proposed system of legal-

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generally too the most expensive crops; when the church, which lays out no part of the expence, is to share so very largely in the profit.” (WN V.ii.e.3, 837). The criticism here, apart from the injustice of paying a tax to the church, is that taxing the produce rather than the rent, as the tithe did, means that this tax falls indiscriminately on the three funds of rent, profit, and labour of which the total value of the product is comprised. Beyond this, Smith is critical of the highly localized administration of the tax, which discourages the spending of the tax on public infrastructure. More generally, Smith criticizes any form of taxation on produce, since this creates practical problems of surveillance (WN V.ii.e.7, 839).

<sup>146</sup> Although, he acknowledges that, in practice, separating this portion of ground rent from the payment commonly termed “rent” paid by the tenant to the landlord – which also includes some payment for the use of the building – presents some difficulties.

contractual incentives in the following terms:

The principal attention of the sovereign ought to be to encourage, by every means in his power, the attention both of the landlord and of the farmer; by allowing both to pursue their own interest in their own way, and according to their own judgment; by giving to both the most perfect security that they shall enjoy the full recompence of their own industry; and by procuring to both the most extensive market for every part of their produce, in consequence of establishing the easiest and safest communications both by land and by water, through every part of his own dominions, as well as the most unbounded freedom of exportation to the dominions of all other princes. (WN V.ii.d.18, 833)

The gain to the sovereign of such a system would be twofold. Firstly, it would increase the tax revenues compared to what Smith sees as the deficient existing system of British land taxation by increasing taxes to match present rental values. Secondly, if the system of incentives was successful, it would promote the improvement of land throughout the country. For Smith, therefore, reform of the tax system becomes central to the broader scheme of territorial development, and maximization of resources.

In this way, and by a very long route, Smith proposes an answer to the question of the British state debt. The state would best serve its interests by fostering the long-term improvement of land. This is, in effect, to ensure that the accumulated wealth within the territory was not at risk of being lost, but was rather “spread as it were over the face of that country” (WN III.iv.24, 426), in a form that was both durable, and provided the productive resources for development of wealth. By the prudent taxation of its lands, the state ensured itself the most sustainable form of revenue. In the closing passages of the work, Smith suggests that only if this system of taxation could also be extended to Britain’s colonies would the great expense of their military protection be worth the enormous cost it imposed on the state. Noting, presciently, the political improbability of this, he suggests that the British state might adopt a more Grecian approach to its colonies, allowing them to establish themselves as independent societies, in order that both might benefit from their mutual trade.

## Conclusions

This chapter has suggested that territory is a third and final register on which land is considered



within *The Wealth of Nations*. Whilst Smith acknowledges that the concept of territory assumes military control over an area, the most fundamental associations of territory in the text are with subsistence and taxation. In a modern state, territory constitutes the area both from which the greatest part of the supply of raw materials, including foodstuffs, is assumed to be drawn, and which must yield a revenue to the state. Territory is simultaneously the necessary container for wealth, with the result that, as we saw, a useful way to think about Smith's political œconomy as a whole is as an account of territorial development. This is true in particular because of the emphasis Smith places on the improvement of the condition of land. "Durable wealth", he suggests, is that which is spread over the "face" of a country, embodied in the condition of its lands. As such, much of the analysis that he undertakes is directed to understanding this process, both from a theoretical point of view, and an empirical one.

But Smith's concept of territory does not treat it simply as a "container" for wealth, and for the processes of production and exchange with which he is concerned. Nor is territory simply the sum total of the area of land that it encompasses. Rather, territory is clearly understood in relation to a very concrete set of practices. These are of various kinds: the legal practices framing relations of production, practices of land surveying and other calculative and administrative practices associated with taxation, practices of border enforcement and colonial administration. When we start looking at this level in *The Wealth of Nations*, the list goes on. Much of the text consists in detailed consideration of the particular practices that are and have been undertaken by states in relation to their territories. It is these elements, perhaps, that constitute the "innumerable disquisitions on particular points" of which Schumpeter complained in relation to Smith's treatment of land (1994 [1954], 190).

Whilst the theoretical association of territory and subsistence is important, it is perhaps at this level of practice that we most clearly see the continuity of Smith's understanding of territory with the two other registers – earth and property – on which land is considered. All of the practices with which Smith engages in the text ultimately have a bearing on the flow of materials that I suggested is made visible within his earth register. Both property and territory serve in related but distinct ways to mediate these material exchanges. It is only in combination that earth, property, and territory allow Smith's theory to "see" land as a set of material exchanges between humans and

the earth, mediated by a diverse range of social practices. But territory adds an additional layer of complexity by also providing the epistemological vantage point from which the theory as a whole is apprehended. It is this view, precisely, that Smith suggests is necessary for the legislator to adopt in matters of political œconomy. This purely theoretical model is both sustained, and simultaneously given content by the more empirical portion of the work, seen in Smith's attempt to "read off" the conditions of territorial development in various historical and contemporary contexts.

# 7 – David Ricardo’s *Principles*, and the birth of an economic concept of land

## Introduction

The produce of the earth—all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labour, machinery, and capital, is divided among three classes of the community; namely, the proprietor of the land, the owner of the stock or capital necessary for its cultivation, and the labourers by whose industry it is cultivated.

But in different stages of society, the proportions of the whole produce of the earth which will be allotted to each of these classes, under the names of rent, profit, and wages, will be essentially different; depending mainly on the actual fertility of the soil, on the accumulation of capital and population, and on the skill, ingenuity, and instruments employed in agriculture.

To determine the laws which regulate this distribution, is the principal problem in Political Economy (PPET, 5)

These are the very first words with which Ricardo opened the preface of his *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. We can immediately detect a number of very familiar Smithian themes: the relationship between human labour and the earth, societies whose social relations are determined by forms of property, a concern for the density of population within a territory, and the idea of stages of historical development. The emphasis on “laws of distribution” is new, but clearly we could be forgiven for thinking that Ricardo follows directly in Smith’s footsteps. Indeed, it seems, in many respects, that this is how he hoped to be read. As he continued:

The writer, in combating received opinions, has found it necessary to advert more particularly to those passages in the writings of Adam Smith from which he sees reason to differ; but he hopes it will not, on that account, be suspected that he does not, in common with all those who acknowledge the importance of the science of Political Economy, participate in the admiration which the profound work of this celebrated author so justly excites. (PPET, 6)

Whilst wishing to challenge certain doctrines within *The Wealth of Nations*, therefore, Ricardo nevertheless set himself up as an inheritor of Smithian political economy, and indeed much of the text is presented as a correction or clarification of Smithian principles. Following from the detailed account of Smith’s work in the preceding chapters, however, I want to suggest here that Ricardo’s

work should not be read straightforwardly as a development of Smith's work, but rather as a radical departure from its theoretical foundations. This is particularly so in respect to the complex web of conceptual relations around land. The chapter argues that Ricardo, whilst avowedly following Smith's understanding of the remit of political economy, in fact radically alters the foundations on which it operates. He does this by conflating the three distinct registers (earth, property, and territory) in which I have suggested Smith thinks about land. Instead, he collapses these into a new – and what we might call, in disciplinary terms, a properly “economic” – concept. In the process, land is conceptually shorn of its association with a process of material exchange and natural historical understanding of human subsistence. Instead land becomes a much more abstract notion, narrowly associated with rent as an analytical principle.

In order to demonstrate this, the discussion proceeds in three sections: the first provides some brief background to the composition of Ricardo's *Principles*, and its subsequent reception; the second outlines in two subsections the terms in which Ricardo discusses land within the text; and a third and final section analyses the extent to which Ricardo's concept of land constitutes a “break” with the Smithian system.

## **Biography and context**

Ricardo's background is very different to that of Smith. Born in 1772 into a Jewish family living in the City of London, he entered his father's stockbrokerage business at the age of only fourteen, and by twenty-one had already set up a financial business of his own (Henderson 1997, 18). As a financier he was extremely successful, and played a significant role in helping the British Government secure finance for its military operations during the Napoleonic wars. On the occasion of the victory of the British alliance at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Ricardo realized a substantial profit, on the basis of which he was able to retire with a sizeable fortune, buying a 5,000 acre country estate in Gloucestershire. He is understood first to have become interested in political economy on reading *The Wealth of Nations* in 1799 (Peach 2006), and later devoted the majority of his attention to his own political economic writings, maintaining lengthy correspondence and friendships with other prominent intellectual figures of the day, notably Thomas Malthus, Jeremy

Bentham, and James Mill. Two essays, *The High Price of Bullion, a Proof of the Depreciation of Bank Notes* of 1810, and *Essay on the Influence of a Low Price of Corn on the Profits of Stock* of 1815 gained him early recognition in Parliamentary circles, but his most fully developed and influential work was his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, first published in 1817 (additions and modifications being made in two further editions of 1819 and 1821). In 1819, encouraged by Mill, Ricardo entered Parliament by buying the seat of an Irish rotten borough, and was a keen attendant of Parliament, continuing to engage principally in issues of currency and agriculture, until his death in 1823.

The publication of Ricardo's *Principles* came forty-one years after the initial publication of *The Wealth of Nations*. In the intervening time, the French Revolution and its repercussions had had a substantial impact on political economic thought on both sides of the channel. By the early nineteenth century, Smith's name had become associated with writers such as Rousseau and Voltaire in France, and the contemporary radicalism of William Godwin and Mary Wollestonecraft in England. As such, he was regarded by more conservative commentators as having "dangerous" ideas (Rothschild 1992; Backhouse and Tribe 2018, 82). It was a period of political repression of subversive ideas, seen perhaps most famously during Ricardo's lifetime in the Peterloo massacre of 1819. Moreover, English political economy had come to be dominated by a narrow set of discussions around currency, grain prices, and population. Undoubtedly this discourse was crucially shaped by the turbulent effects of the Napoleonic wars (1790-1815), which saw a cessation of grain imports, violent fluctuations in grain prices, and a number of banking crises.<sup>147</sup>

In this context, Ricardo emerged as the most prominent political economist of his generation, and (as was noted in Chapter One) continued to influence economists including John Stuart Mill and Alfred Marshall through the nineteenth century and after. However, contemporaries criticized his difficult style, the French political economist Jean-Baptiste Say, for example, complaining that Ricardo "had made demands too great on the continued exercise of thought" of his reader (Say, quoted in Morgan 2012, 68). As Mary Morgan notes, his style of analysis is unusual, and certainly novel for his time, in that it combined more traditional conceptual reasoning with functional

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<sup>147</sup> See Backhouse (1994, 130) on the connection between currency fluctuation and the development of Ricardo's ideas as part of what became known as the "bullion controversy".

quantitative “tools” that served to further his arguments by demonstrating the supposed “laws” of political economy (*ibid.*).<sup>148</sup> Today, Ricardo remains a controversial figure, praised by some for his analytical rigour, and castigated by others for the abstraction he brought to economics. The most famous critique, in this respect, is that of Joseph Schumpeter, who coined the term “Ricardian vice” to refer to the oversimplification of analytical constructions, and excessive reliance on bold assumptions (Schumpeter 1994 [1954]).

Unlike Smith, Ricardo left behind a significant quantity of notes and correspondence, in addition to his published work, although it took many decades for this material to be collated. Scholarship on Ricardo has benefited greatly from the editorial work of Piero Sraffa, assisted by Maurice Dobb, whose eleven-volume edition of *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo* was published in 1951. Whereas Smith has received attention of scholars across a range of disciplines, the overwhelming majority of commentary on Ricardo has been from economists and historians of economic thought. The relationship between Smith and Ricardo is another topic of contention. Some, such as Samuel Hollander, have emphasized the continuity of Ricardo’s thought with Smith, while others, such as Hutchison (1978) and Berg (1980) have seen Ricardo as departing from the approach of Smith.

However, in arguing for a “break” between Smith and Ricardo, this chapter subscribes to a particularly strong version of this view which is inaugurated in Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]), and subsequently developed in various forms by others (especially Tribe 1978, 2015; see also Walter 2011; Dix 2014; Vigo de Lima and Guizzo 2015). This locates in Ricardo’s work the completion of an epistemological break with earlier traditions of thought. The present chapter does not itself attempt to demonstrate such a break in political economic thought as a whole,

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<sup>148</sup> Morgan notes in reference to these quantitative tools that Ricardo uses a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning (2012, 45n). Most other commentators, however, have emphasized Ricardo’s unusually strong affinity to deductive reasoning. Margaret Schabas, for example, suggests that, whilst Smith had certainly sought general principles, Ricardo started from the assumption of the existence of laws in the spheres of production and distribution (2009, pp. 102–3). Robert Nadeau agrees, seeing Ricardo as embracing Smith’s general understanding of natural laws, but simultaneously attempting to “tighten the chains” linking the different elements of his theoretical edifice (2003, 30). Ricardo, in a letter to Mill, expressed his dismay at Malthus’s belief that political economy was not “a strict science like the mathematics” (*Works VIII*, 331). Perhaps the most scathing assessment of this ambition comes from Philip Mirowski, who refers to Ricardo as, “a zealot intent on raising the scientific status of political economy who himself possessed little or no familiarity with either the contemporary practices of scientists or the history of the sciences” (1989, 171).

which would demand a very different and much broader kind of investigation. What it does, however, is to suggest that we can locate a more specific but important form of “break” between Smith and Ricardo in relation to their understandings of land, one which is both consistent with Foucault’s notion of an epistemological break, and may simultaneously modify our understanding of this.

## **Land in the theoretical structure of Ricardo’s *Principles***

### Rent and agriculture

Land in the *Principles* is crucial to the distributional analysis which is at the core of Ricardo’s theoretical work. His central point is to demonstrate, contra Smith, that rising wealth within a country will not necessarily benefit the society as a whole. Rather, he argues that, in time, all gains in wealth will be progressively appropriated by landlords – the concern, above all, being that this will put an end to the process of the accumulation of capital, and thus the accrual of further wealth. In demonstrating this, Ricardo finds it necessary to pay particular attention to the nature of rent. As was discussed in Chapter One, Ricardo’s theory of rent was not entirely new when the *Principles* was first published in 1817, the ideas emerging from a set of debates between Ricardo, Malthus and others in 1815. Nevertheless, Ricardo’s *Principles* remains the classic statement of this theory, which constitutes a central part of the theoretical schema of the work as a whole.

The pre-condition for this analysis is the assumption that, at all times, the wages of labour tend towards a subsistence rate. Ricardo was not alone in this assumption. The same general idea is found in Smith’s work, and indeed Smith agrees with the notion that the size of the labouring class broadly responds to the demand of the labour market (WN I.viii.40, 98). In Smith’s work, however, it is tempered by the observation that the condition of the labouring classes, in general, seems to be progressively improving. By 1817, however, the association between the wages of labour and a bare subsistence had become a more prominent trope of political economic thought. This was particularly through Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1996 [1798]), which was influential for Ricardo (see PPET, 398), and which had been much more explicit than Smith

in treating labour as a proxy for population in general.

Ricardo's formulation was equally as stark as Malthus's, but was expressed in terms of the relationship between labour and the capital that was seen to provide its employment.

Population regulates itself by the funds which are to employ it, and therefore always increases or diminishes with the increase or diminution of capital. (PPET, 78)

In the *Principles*, the two inter-linked assumptions, firstly that labour acts as a proxy for population, and, secondly, that the reward of the labourer always tends towards a subsistence rate, become axiomatic to the analysis. This is because Ricardo, like both Smith and Malthus, holds food to be the greatest part of subsistence, and thus the subsistence rate for wages comes to be linked to the price of agricultural produce in the society. Ricardo's distributional model is based on the assumption that this agricultural produce is derived from the home territory, and is not imported. As such, the problem of the tension between a steadily growing population and a finite supply of land becomes crucial.

Ricardo defines rent as "that portion of the produce of the earth which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil" (PPET, 67), or the money paid by the farmer for the "productive powers of the land" (PPET, 68). These "powers" are specifically those relating to the reproductive capacities of the land – the production of food, and other subsistence goods. In doing so, he seeks to counter what he sees as an ambiguity in Smith's treatment of rent. Smith, Ricardo says, sometimes speaks of rent in this strict sense, but sometimes confuses the matter by using the word "rent" in the more general sense to refer instead to the actual payment made to the landlord, which in common parlance is also called "rent" (PPET, 67-8).<sup>149</sup> The latter, Ricardo says, properly speaking, may also include not only rent by profit. He has in mind two circumstances in particular here. The first is the improvements that landlords have made to their

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<sup>149</sup> As was noted in Chapter Five, Smith clearly acknowledges this distinction between the "rent" paid to the landlord, and rent as an analytical principle, though it is true that he does not seek to qualify the constituent parts of the former with anything like the same degree of analytical precision as Ricardo. The main exception to this is in the discussion of the rent of houses as an object of taxation, where Smith wishes to draw a clear distinction between the "ground rent" and the part of the payment from the tenant that is, strictly speaking, a payment for the use of the house, which is a form of capital, and therefore subject to the principle of profits rather than rents. As was also noted, Smith discusses the question of agricultural improvements at length, and particularly those long-term improvements that can only, in general, be carried out by the landlord. These are discussed as an application of the capital of the landlord to the land itself, though Ricardo is correct to observe that Smith does not then rigorously maintain the distinction between the part of the land's value that is regulated by profits, and the part that is regulated by rents.



land, such as buildings etc., the returns of which – being derived, properly speaking, from the application of a capital – must be regulated by the principle of profit, rather than rent. The second is payments which are made not for the reproductive capacities of the soil, but instead for the removal from the land of resources which cannot be replaced – the key examples being quarrying and mining.<sup>150</sup>

Ricardo wants to restrict his analysis to rent in this strict sense of a payment for the “productive powers of the land”, since it is through this definition that rents can be strictly linked to agricultural productivity, and thus to subsistence via the rate at which wages must be paid. However, he insists that it is not simply the case, as Smith had suggested, that rents form a constituent part of the price of such subsistence goods. Ricardo, like Smith, holds to the conceptual distinction between the “market” price, which is determined by supply and demand for the good in the marketplace, and the “natural” price, which is determined by the cost of production of the good. Smith’s explanation of the “natural” price of commodities had suggested that these were composed of the sum of the wages, profits, and rents (each, in turn, paid at their own “natural” rates) that went into the production of a specific good (see WN I.vii.4, 72). Instead, for Ricardo, rents do not form a constituent part of prices at all, but are simply a function of the finitude and differential fertility of land.

In order to explain this view, Ricardo starts by offering his own form of conjectural historical explanation for the existence of rent:

On the first settling of a country, in which there is an abundance of rich and fertile land, a very small proportion of which is required to be cultivated for the support of the actual population, or indeed can be cultivated with the capital which the population can command, there will be no rent; for no one would pay for the use of land, when there was an abundant quantity not yet appropriated, and, therefore, at the disposal of whosoever might choose to cultivate it... On the common principles of supply and

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<sup>150</sup> It is interesting to note that housing is entirely excluded from Ricardo’s account of rent. It reappears, in a short chapter on taxes on houses (PPET, ch.XIV), where Ricardo largely agrees with Smith’s analysis of the effects of taxation of ground rents (though disagrees as to the justice of this). Ricardo nowhere notes the tension between his overall definition of rent, which relies on the notion of the “productive powers of the land”, and the notion of a “ground rent” as the rent of the land on which a house is sited. The latter, of course, cannot be a payment for the productive powers of the land. Had Ricardo reasoned through this tension, he might have been forced to give more prominence to the idea of land as a spatial monopoly (which indeed he does appear to endorse at PPET, 284), in the sense that this becomes important in Henry George’s work later in the nineteenth century. As it is, Ricardo’s analysis pertains narrowly to agricultural rents.

demand, no rent could be paid for such land... (PPET, 69)

The argument runs that rents only come into existence with the expansion of population, when the best and most accessible lands which will naturally be the first taken into cultivation have already been appropriated.

Crucial to this theory is the notion of land's varying natural fertility.

If all land had the same properties, if it were unlimited in quantity, and uniform in quality, no charge could be made for its use, unless where it possessed peculiar advantages of situation. It is only, then, because land is not unlimited in quantity and uniform in quality, and because in the progress of population, land of an inferior quality, or less advantageously situated, is called into cultivation, that rent is ever paid for the use of it. (PPET, 70)<sup>151</sup>

Consistently with his numerical approach, Ricardo proceeds by proposing that land exists in discrete "grades" of fertility (see PPET, 70ff.). Once all of the land of the first and highest quality has been taken into cultivation, further increases in population would demand that lands of a second quality were then also brought into cultivation. But lands of this second, lower quality could only be taken into cultivation if prices of agricultural goods had risen so high as to permit the cultivation of these less fertile lands. The quantity of produce yielded by this second grade of land must, by definition, necessarily be less than that of the first grade. In order for this land to be cultivated, therefore, scarcity and demand must have driven the prices fetched by agricultural goods high enough for the lesser produce of this second quality of land in comparison to the first to be nevertheless sufficient to cover the costs of its production.

In this example, the second grade of land that is taken into cultivation is precisely that which is just fertile enough to yield a produce sufficient to pay the profits of the capital engaged in its cultivation. This hinges on a notion of the "normal profits" of stock – an idea which is also found in Smith, but which again becomes more prominent in Ricardo's system. For Ricardo, profits are assumed to equalize across industries within a country. If the normal profits of stock are, for example, 10%, then any activity not yielding this profit will not be undertaken, or will have the capitals engaged in this activity withdrawn. As such, at the moment when it becomes profitable to take the second grade of land into cultivation, the market prices fetched by agricultural goods

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<sup>151</sup> This wording is from edition three. The wording of editions one and two is slightly different, though the meaning is unmodified.

would be at a point whereby cultivation of the next, third, grade is still impossible. At this point, the produce of the second grade will be that which is sufficient only to pay the normal profits of stock with no remainder. In other words, this land cannot produce enough to leave anything for a rent for its owner. However, the same rise in the prices of agricultural goods that brought the second grade of land into cultivation must simultaneously mean that the greater produce of the more fertile first grade of land will yield a total sale price exceeding what is necessary to pay the normal profits of stock to the cultivator, leaving a surplus that can, in time, be appropriated by the landlord.

With the increase of population, therefore, demand for food and other agricultural products will continue to push up prices, and, in the process, successively lower grades of land will be taken into cultivation. Each further grade of land taken into cultivation signals that the price is now sufficient for the previous lowest grade of land in cultivation to yield a rent, and simultaneously that the rents of all superior grades will increase in proportion to the rise of prices. The point of this rather cumbersome and long-winded reasoning is to demonstrate that rent cannot be said, as Smith does, to constitute a part of the price of such produce (see PPE'T, 329). Instead, Ricardo's reasoning claims to demonstrate that the price is set at the margin of cultivation – that is, by the lowest grade of land that the present demand for agricultural goods allows to be cultivated. Thus rent is not a component part of prices, but rather a residual defined by the surplus of production on a given portion of land above what is necessary to pay the normal profits of stock.

Part of the point, for Ricardo, of emphasizing so strongly that rent does not form one of the component parts of price was in fact precisely to dispatch rent as a topic of analysis, in order to turn the focus on profits and wages (see Bidard and Erreygers 2015). This is already implicit in the preface, in which Ricardo refers to the recent discovery of the “true doctrine of rent”, “without a knowledge of which, it is impossible to understand the effect of the progress of wealth on profits and wages” (PPE'T, 5). Indeed, Ricardo confirmed in his correspondence that part of the aim of the theoretical structure of the *Principles* was “getting rid of rent” (*Works VIII*, 194). He held this task to be of great importance, since it allowed the analytical focus to be placed on what seemed to him the more pressing question of the distributional relationship between labour and capital. The desire to “get rid” of rent is further reflected in the early positioning of the chapter “On Rent”

within the structure of the work as a whole, which comes immediately after the important opening chapter “On Value”.<sup>152</sup>

As was noted above, this analysis of rent, which is so central to the Ricardian system, is specifically concerned with agricultural rents. For Ricardo, as for Smith, agricultural production holds a special theoretical significance. But the nature of this significance in the *Principles* is very different to how Smith conceives of it within *The Wealth of Nations*. Indeed, Ricardo explicitly opposes Smith’s notion of nature’s own “labour” that was discussed here in some detail in Chapter Four:

“In agriculture too,” says Adam Smith, “nature labours along with man; and though her labour costs no expense, its produce has its value, as well as that of the most expensive workman.”<sup>153</sup> The labour of nature is paid, not because she does much, but because she does little. In proportion as she becomes niggardly in her gifts, she exacts a greater price for her work. Where she is munificently beneficent, she always works gratis. (PPET, 76n)

The phrasing of Ricardo’s critique follows his presentation of the theory of rent, whereby rent is caused by less fertile lands being brought into production. Critiquing the notion of nature’s “labour”, Ricardo continues by asking why agriculture should be seen as different in this respect to any other form of industry.

Does nature nothing for man in manufactures? Are the powers of wind and water, which move our machinery, and assist navigation, nothing? The pressure of the atmosphere and the elasticity of steam, which enable us to work the most stupendous engines—are they not the gifts of nature? to say nothing of the effects of the matter of heat in softening and melting metals, of the decomposition of the atmosphere in the process of dyeing and fermentation. There is not a manufacture which can be mentioned, in which nature does not give her assistance to man, and give it too, generously and gratuitously. (*ibid.*)

In this critique, Ricardo appears to be following J.-B. Say, whose *Traité d'économie politique* Ricardo quotes on a number of occasions. Say’s argument runs as follows.

The earth... is not the only agent of nature which has a productive power; but it is the only one, or nearly so, that one set of men take to themselves, to the exclusion of others; and of which, consequently, they can appropriate the benefits.<sup>154</sup> (Say, quoted in PPET,

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<sup>152</sup> Given that much of the chapter layout of the *Principles* mirrors that of *The Wealth of Nations*, numerous commentators, including Sraffa, have noted the significance of the much earlier positioning of Ricardo’s chapter on rent compared to the equivalent chapter in Smith’s work (WN I.xi). This, in Sraffa’s words “was dictated by the necessity for Ricardo of ‘getting rid of rent’ (as he put it), in order to simplify the problem of the distribution between capitalist and labourer” (PPET, xxiii).

<sup>153</sup> The original actually reads “workmen”, see WN II.v.12, 363.

<sup>154</sup> This is Ricardo’s translation. He chooses to render the French *la terre* here as “earth” rather than “land” probably for rhetorical effect more than anything. In other translations, the term is rendered as “land”.

69n; see Say 2001 [1803], 190)

Ricardo thus argues that should any of the other “agents of nature” that he mentions be subject to appropriation, then they might also at that point yield a rent to their owners. Ricardo insists therefore that any specificity that agriculture might have has nothing to do with such a vague notion as nature’s labour. The most explicit statement of this comes in another quoted passage to which Ricardo indicates his clear approval. This time it is from David Buchanan’s critical commentary in his 1814 edition of *The Wealth of Nations*. This opposes the idea that nature’s labour is the foundation of rent.

The notion of agriculture yielding a produce, and a rent in consequence, because nature concurs with human industry in the process of cultivation, is a mere fancy. It is not from the produce, but from the price at which the produce is sold, that the rent is derived; and this price is got not because nature assists in the production, but because it is the price which suits the consumption to the supply. (Buchanan, quoted in PPET, 77n; see Smith 1817 [1814], vol ii, 55n)

On this basis, Ricardo agrees with Buchanan that there is no gain to society as a whole from the reproduction of rents, which is a view that he accuses Smith of imparting.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, on the contrary, in Buchanan’s words, the reproduction of rents comes solely “at the expense of the community at large” (*ibid.*).

Whilst Ricardo seeks to do away with the special association of agriculture with the action of nature, therefore, he nevertheless still accords a special role to agriculture within his theoretical system. This is through its fundamental relation to labour. As was seen above, the wages of labour are assumed always to tend towards a subsistence rate. Since food and other “raw produce” of land are thought to constitute the greatest part of the subsistence of the worker, the natural rate of wages is therefore thought to depend largely on the natural price of such raw produce (PPET, 93). Because food is assumed to be drawn from the land within a country, Ricardo’s discussion of agricultural rents makes clear that, with the expansion of population, the prices of this raw produce will tend to rise. Again, this is not, Ricardo insists, because increasing rents constitute a part of the price of agricultural produce, but rather because the price of the produce is determined

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<sup>155</sup> As should be clear from the preceding chapter, this is a potentially misleading portrayal of Smith’s views. Smith certainly saw increasing rents as a benefit to the society, but for two reasons which are not here addressed directly by Ricardo. Firstly, because Smith thought that increasing rents acted as one indicator of the improvement of the land. Secondly, and more fundamentally because Smith, like the Physiocrats, saw land as by far the most proper point of taxation. Increasing rents, if taxed, would therefore allow the state to levy a larger revenue.

by the profits of the capital applied to the least fertile grade of land in cultivation. As the fertility of land in cultivation progressively decreases, therefore, so does the productivity of the labour employed in this cultivation, and more labour is required to produce the same amount of food, raising prices.

This is contrary to the effect on all other kinds of commodities.

The natural price of all commodities, excepting raw produce and labour, has a tendency to fall, in the progress of wealth and population; for though, on one hand, they are enhanced in real value, from the rise in the natural price of the raw material of which they are made, this is more than counterbalanced by the improvements in machinery, by the better division and distribution of labour, and by the increasing skill, both in science and art, of the producers. (PPET, 93-4)

Ricardo recognizes here that the price of “raw produce” is likely to affect all other commodities. This is both through the cost of any raw materials involved in their production, and through the cost of labour involved in making the commodity, which will rise with any increase in the cost of subsistence. But, he argues, other than for the raw produce itself, and for labour, the effect of increasing scarcity and infertility of land on the prices of the majority of commodities is likely to be more than counteracted by the gains to productivity that are simultaneously brought by an increased division of labour, and by technical improvements in processes of production. Ricardo therefore drops the Smithian notion that there is something intrinsically special to agricultural labour in itself. However, the dynamics of Ricardo’s model of production and distribution mean that the value of agricultural products is a determining factor within the operation of the system as a whole, thereby reinstating agriculture in a key theoretical role.

### Distribution, labour, and comparative advantage

As much as Ricardo might have been trying to “get rid” of rent, the theorization of agricultural rents within the *Principles* remains foundational to his distributional argument. On the basis of the above theory, Ricardo proceeds to analyse the long-term effects of the increasing land scarcity on labour and capital. The way this is reasoned is long and complex, making use of several numerical examples, culminating in what Morgan describes as a set of tabulated accounts for a “model farm” (2012, 56). It involves, for example, investigating the effects of agricultural prices on wages, the

varying proportions spent by the labourer on necessary goods and “comforts” (PPET, 101), effects caused by variations in the supply of money, and the relation between wages and profits. It is not necessary here to go through this reasoning in detail, but the general argument can be summarized.

The easiest way to convey the nature of Ricardo’s distributional argument is by thinking not in terms of money, but rather in terms of the distribution of the physical product of a farm. At points, Ricardo uses the term “corn” to denote this product.<sup>156</sup> Although he is not explicit about this, it is clear that this “corn” is not in fact supposed to denote an actual physical product, but rather acts as a proxy for agricultural produce in general. The decisive point in the distributional argument is that the natural rate of wages can never fall below the subsistence level.<sup>157</sup> Out of the total product of the farm, therefore, a given number of labourers will always require a certain amount of “corn” as their minimal subsistence. On the least fertile land in cultivation, whatever is left after these wages are paid will constitute the profits of the farmer (PPET, 112). As population increases, and progressively less fertile lands are taken into cultivation, however, the total “corn” generated on the least fertile land being cultivated will reduce. This means that, whilst the labourers will require the same absolute amount of “corn” for their subsistence, the “corn” remaining for the profit of the farmer will be reduced. According to the theory of rent, the situation is necessarily the same on all other grades of land, since any surplus product above what is necessary to pay the labour and the profits of stock on the least fertile land in cultivation will be appropriated by the landlord as a rent. This mechanism means that “whatever increases wages, necessarily reduces profits” (PPET, 118). Moreover, since profits are always assumed to equalize, the decline of profits in agriculture must necessarily mean the decline of profits in all forms of industry in the country.

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<sup>156</sup> This “corn model” is actually closer to how Ricardo explained distribution in his earlier *Essay on Profits* of 1815 (*Works*, IV). Sraffa suggests that this was a “considerable simplification” (*Works*, I, xxxii) and that the *Principles* presented a much more advanced model of distribution in terms of labour. It is true that Ricardo clearly tries to integrate his account of rent with his account of value. But on a number of occasions he falls back to notions of “corn rent” and “corn wages”, which demonstrate that this way of conceiving of distribution was still very much operative in the *Principles*. The question of the role of a corn model in Ricardo’s thought has been subject to more recent debate summarized by Peach (2001).

<sup>157</sup> In the long term, Ricardo thinks that wages will tend towards this subsistence level, with labourers experiencing a diminishing capacity to purchase “comforts” (see PPET, 101-2). It is as part of the same line of reasoning that Ricardo, concurring with Malthus (PPET, 106) argues strongly against the contemporary poor laws.

The dire implication of this is that the growth of population will, by increasing the scarcity of land, ultimately reduce all profits to zero, and accumulation of capital will come to a stop. It is in the context of this looming threat of the “stationary state” (PPET, 109) that the relationship between capital and labour comes to take the fore.<sup>158</sup> The key question, for Ricardo, is what can counter this tendency of profits to decline with the increase of population. It is here that the labour theory of value comes to play a key role. Although they are presented as continuous in the *Principles*, Ricardo later conceded that this theory is not *strictly* related to the distributional argument, which, as demonstrated above, can be reasoned purely (if somewhat abstractly) in terms of a physical product.<sup>159</sup> Nevertheless, the labour theory comes to play an important role when Ricardo is thinking about the factors, beyond population, that might influence profits.

It is worth looking briefly at how Ricardo sets up the discussion of value here.<sup>160</sup> This is not least because, in Chapter Four, I suggested that, in *The Wealth of Nations*, both labour and value are intimately connected in a number of ways to land (particularly as conceived as the products of the earth). As was already seen above, Ricardo decisively rejects Smith’s notion of “nature’s labour”, turning the focus decisively on the labour of human beings. However, this is not the end of his divergence from Smith on this topic. The very first passage of the work, in Chapter One, opens by resolutely rejecting Smith’s notion of a dual meaning to the word “value”. Ricardo finds the twofold definition, whereby value refers both to “value in use” and “value in exchange” unworkable. Rather he proposes to resolve this imprecision by positing that utility is not a distinct *form* of value, but rather a *pre-requisite* of it. If something had no use, he suggests, then,

it would be destitute of exchangeable value, however scarce it might be, or whatever quantity of labour might be necessary to procure it (PPET, 11).

Through this shift, within the space of two short paragraphs, Ricardo jettisons the whole sphere of use values that I suggested were so central to Smith’s account of the relationship between land

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<sup>158</sup> Ricardo refers to the “stationary state” during his discussion of the poor laws, but says that he trusts “we are yet far distant” from this condition. Nevertheless, the threat of declining profits clearly hangs over the entire work.

<sup>159</sup> In a letter from Ricardo to John Ramsey McCulloch of 13 June 1820, Ricardo admitted, that, “[a]fter all, the great questions of Rent, Wages, and Profits must be explained by the proportions in which the whole produce is divided between landlords, capitalists, and labourers, and which are not essentially connected with the doctrine of value.” (*Works*, VIII.)

<sup>160</sup> It is worth noting that the Ricardo’s views on value continued to develop throughout his career, including after the final edition of the *Principles* was published. As Faccarello notes, the question of value continued to be problematic for Ricardo at various points (Faccarello 2015).



and labour. Value, for Ricardo, is solely exchangeable value.

In light of Ricardo's desire to "get rid" of rent, the focus gets thrown on to the relationship between labour and capital. The central problem, for Ricardo, is to determine the equivalence of these things in processes of production. It is this equivalence that is provided by the concept of labour. Like Smith, Ricardo holds to the notion that the value of an object is equal to the amount of labour embodied in its production. However, Ricardo's understanding of this principle differs significantly from Smith. He proposes a distinction between those commodities whose value is determined solely by their scarcity, such as rare statues or paintings, or wines grown on very particular soils, and whose supply is therefore very limited, and those goods whose supply can be increased by human labour. Of the former, Ricardo says that there is no possible labour that can increase the available quantity of these goods. These, however, constitute only "a very small part of the mass of commodities daily exchanged in the market" (PPET, 12). On this basis, he concludes that, for the purposes of analysis, such rare commodities can be ignored:

In speaking then of commodities, of their exchangeable value, and of the laws which regulate their relative prices, we mean always such commodities only as can be increased in quantity by the exertion of human industry (*ibid.*).<sup>161</sup>

In this way Ricardo creates what seems a somewhat forced distinction between goods whose value is determined by scarcity (but which are so few as to be analytically negligible), and that more general category of goods whose value is determined by labour.<sup>162</sup> The result of this theoretical procedure is to dispose, for the most part, of the problem of supply and demand, allowing Ricardo to conduct his analysis based on prices, conceived as acting as a proxy – albeit, he concedes, an

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<sup>161</sup> It is interesting to note that Ricardo here is using a Smithian distinction, but not in the manner in which it is employed by Smith. The threefold distinction between those goods which it is within the power of human industry to increase the supply, those which is not within the power of human industry to increase the supply, and those for which the capacity of human industry to effect their increase is limited or uncertain, is, as was noted in Chapter Six, a necessary part of Smith's theoretical apparatus for "reading off" the state of improvement within a territory from very limited information. Here, Ricardo drops the third category, and repurposes the distinction between the goods that can and cannot be increased by human labour in his theory of value, in a way that Smith does not.

<sup>162</sup> This move is reinforced in chapter IV of the *Principles*, where Ricardo addressed the distinction between "market" and "natural" prices that he found to have been "most ably treated" (PPET, 91) within *The Wealth of Nations*. Here Ricardo argues that disturbance of market prices (which are, he agrees, regulated by supply and demand) from the natural price (the price determined by the cost of production) is always temporary, and in any case minimal. Smith's much more elegant account of the relationship between market and natural prices, hinged on an astronomical metaphor, whereby the former would always be "gravitating" towards the latter (WN I.vii.15, 75). Smith, however, takes seriously the variation of these two, and tries to take this into account in his analysis of territorial development.

imperfect one – for the quantity of labour embodied in a product (PPET, 46).<sup>163</sup>

Ricardo goes on to make another significant critique of Smith. This runs that Smith limited his own theory of labour as the measure of exchange to the “early and rude state of society”, prior to the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock (PPET 22-23n).<sup>164</sup> This has been the cause of much discussion amongst historians of economic thought.<sup>165</sup> For Ricardo, this was an intolerable weakening of the notion that labour constituted the measure of *all* exchange, and he therefore went to great lengths to demonstrate that this still held even in modern societies.<sup>166</sup> The key problem for Ricardo was to demonstrate that the principle of labour as the measure of exchange held even in the capital-intensive processes that constituted contemporary forms of production. He did this by investigating in some detail the effects on processes of production – conceived numerically, in terms of price – of a set of scenarios in which capital (and particularly machinery) might be employed under differing conditions (see PPET, 22ff.).

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<sup>163</sup> There does remain a role for supply and demand in two respects. The first, as was implicit above, is in determining the allocation of capital. In relation to the discussion of rent, for example, this manifests in the signal of increasing prices which, above a certain level, enables capital to be applied to the next “grade” of land. Secondly, supply and demand remains important in Ricardo’s discussion of wages, particularly in relation to the welfare of the labourer. Ricardo sees no hope for modifying the “law” by which wages are maintained at a subsistence level, and therefore thinks the best that can be hoped to protect labourers is that they should gain a taste for certain, limited luxuries during times of high demand for labour. This might nudge up the price of wages, and, in doing so, provide a certain buffer when the demand for labour drops in proportion to the supply, and wages might otherwise temporarily fall below a subsistence level. In Ricardo’s words: “The friends of humanity cannot but wish that in all countries the labouring classes should have a taste for comforts and enjoyments, and that they should be stimulated by all legal means in their exertions to procure them. There cannot be a better security against a superabundant population.” (PPET, 100)

<sup>164</sup> This critique was only explicitly made in the first and second editions of the *Principles*. In edition three, the crucial first chapter on value was substantially re-written. Some have interpreted this as a retreat on the part of Ricardo from his earlier statements on value (e.g. Hollander 1904). I follow Sraffa’s reading, however, which suggests that the modifications in edition three were intended more as a clarification than a modification (*Works*, I, xxxvi). Whilst the explicit critique of Smith in relation to the limiting of the value principle of exchange to the “early and rude state of society” disappears, the quote from Smith on which he bases this critique remains, and the content of his explanation of how labour holds as a measure of exchange even under conditions of contemporary production remains intact.

<sup>165</sup> For a more recent review see Peach (2009).

<sup>166</sup> The textual evidence would seem to suggest that it is unlikely that Smith intended the idea of labour as the measure of exchange to be limited only to the “early and rude state of society”. His frequent invocations of labour in relation to processes of exchange throughout the work would seem to suggest that the principle was understood to hold for *all* market exchange, though it is true that this is never made explicit. Indeed, if it had been made explicit, then it is possible that a number of the conceptual problems with which Ricardo wrestles would have confronted Smith. However, Smith insisted that labour was an “abstract notion” (WN I.v.5, 49), and that there was no exact equivalence that was knowable. Hence, he devoted significant space to the construction of the elaborate apparatus to “read off”, empirically, the conditions of production within a territory. Ricardo is not interested in such an empirical method, but is instead resolutely determined to demonstrate the knowability of questions of value.

The key point here is that, just as commodities are understood in terms of an input of labour, capital can also be conceived in terms of the labour already embodied in its production. This creates a conceptual parity between labour and capital, enabling the relationship between them to be investigated qualitatively, and using numerical examples.<sup>167</sup> Ricardo explores this through his use of a series of hypothetical arrangements of production in which, for example, the relative quantities of the labour and capital involved in production, or the effects of differing durabilities of capital are investigated. As elsewhere, these investigations change only one variable at a time, using *ceteris paribus* conditions to investigate the effect of each facet of the labour-capital relationship in turn. Understanding relations of production thus become a matter of accounting for the relative contributions of the labour input by wage labourers, and that labour already embodied in forms of capital. Through these investigations, Ricardo attempts to elucidate the complexities of the embodiment of labour in capital goods, and in particular the dynamics of the replacement of wage labour with capital. This is clearly not an abstract question for Ricardo. It is commonly agreed that the most significant of the modifications to Ricardo's third and final edition of the *Principles* was the addition of a chapter specifically "On Machinery" (PPET, ch.XXXI).<sup>168</sup> In it, Ricardo recants his previously held view that the recent protestations of labourers over the injurious effects of machinery were ill-founded.<sup>169</sup> In fact, Ricardo concludes in the added chapter, workers were in fact right to complain of the effects of machinery, stating that, indeed, "the substitution of machinery for human labour, is often very injurious to the interests of the class of labourers" (PPET, 388).

Although the chapter on machinery focusses on manufacturing, the question of the relative application of capital and labour is equally (indeed perhaps more) important in relation to

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<sup>167</sup> On Ricardo's use of numerical examples as a tool for reasoning, see Morgan (2012).

<sup>168</sup> On the "machinery question", see Berg (Berg 1980). Ricardo's views on political economy took shape in the 1810s, at a time when the use of machines was the focus of significant agitation by labourers. Today this is associated most famously with the Luddite movement (1811-16), in which workers destroyed stocking frames and other industrial machinery. In response, the British Parliament passed The Destruction of Stocking Frames, etc. Act 1812 (52 Geo 3 c. 16), which made the destruction of machinery a capital offence. Although Ricardo does not mention this context explicitly, it is indicative that stockings are one of the most frequently mentioned commodities within Ricardo's *Principles*. More recently, in light of present-day concerns over automation, Ricardo's views on machinery have become the focus of a renewed burst of commentary (see Freni and Salvadori 2019; Hollander 2019; Ramirez 2019).

<sup>169</sup> Ricardo did not make this view explicit in the earlier editions of the *Principles*. He had, however, expressed something like this view in a parliamentary speech of 16 December 1819, in opposition to the plans of Robert Owen for the amelioration of the working classes.

agriculture. Like Smith, Ricardo places a lot of emphasis on the notion of “improvement” in agriculture. As we saw in the preceding chapters, Smith was particularly concerned with the condition of the land itself, and with analysing the interests of the landlord and tenant in undertaking improvements. Ricardo’s interest is related, but he focusses more narrowly on the tenant, and phrases the question of improvement as one of labour productivity. In his words,

it is the essential quality of an improvement to diminish the quantity of labour before required to produce a commodity; and this diminution cannot take place without a fall of its price or relative value. (PPET, 80)

Improvements, in this definition, are anything that abridge the labour required to produce particular goods.

However, in agriculture, Ricardo sees an important distinction between two possible kinds of improvement. The first are those that increase the “productive powers of the land”. These,

are such as the more skilful rotation of crops, or the better choice of manure. These improvements absolutely enable us to obtain the same produce from a smaller quantity of land. (PPET, 80)

This type of improvement consists in better techniques of cultivation, which, through increasing the productivity of the soil, thereby allow a smaller area of land to be cultivated. The reasoning here follows the same line as the above description of the increase in cultivated lands with the growth of population, but operates in the opposite direction. The general adoption of a better technique of cultivation would increase the supply of agricultural products and so lower their market price. This lower market price would necessarily mean that the last grade of land taken into cultivation, though it might now be more productive, would no longer be able to realize the normal profits of stock to the cultivator, and the land would therefore be withdrawn from cultivation.

The second kind of improvements discussed by Ricardo are those that do not increase the ability of the land to yield a produce, as with the first kind, but rather “enable us to obtain its produce with less labour” (PPET, 82).

They are rather directed to the formation of the capital applied to the land, than to the cultivation of the land itself. Improvements in agricultural implements, such as the plough and the thrashing [sic] machine, economy in the use of horses employed in husbandry, and a better knowledge of the veterinary art, are of this nature. Less capital, which is the same thing as less labour, will be employed on the land; but to obtain the

same produce, less land cannot be cultivated. (PPET, 82)

In other words, whilst the first sort of improvements are land-saving, this second sort are labour-saving. As Ricardo points out here, according to his theoretical system, a saving in labour is equivalent to a saving in capital. This equation comes either simply through a reduced employment of labourers, the wages of whom constitute part of the circulating capital that the farmer must employ; or it must come through the employment of a fixed capital (for example, in the form of a machine), which displaces a greater portion of the wage labour previously used in cultivation than that which is embodied in the capital itself.

The crucial question, in this discussion of improvements is the effect on rents. The first kind of improvement must inevitably lower rents, since it will be necessary to cultivate less land to provide the required subsistence for the present level of population. However, the improvement in cultivation will simultaneously lower the price of subsistence for labourers, and thus provide an incentive to the growth of population. Whilst there will be a short-term loss to landlords, therefore, in the long term, rents will increase. The effects of the second kind of improvement are different. Ricardo states that these,

may lower the relative value of produce without lowering the corn rent, though they will lower the money rent of land (PPET, 82)

As was seen above in the outline of the distributional model, Ricardo refers back to the notion of an apportionment of “corn” amongst the labourers, capitalist, and landlord who together comprise the archetypal figures in the process of production. The argument here is that proportion of the produce due to the landlord may not be altered, whilst the exchangeable value of this produce might.<sup>170</sup> As Ricardo goes on to demonstrate, however, in a further tabulated example, this lowered money price would in fact not be a true loss to the purchasing power of the landlord. Rather, he would in fact still gain from the lowering of the price of all goods that the improvement in agriculture had effected, by lowering the price of raw produce (PPET, 83-4n). In the course of this discussion, therefore, Ricardo makes sure that there is no confusion regarding his assessment that all forms of agricultural improvements constitute a great benefit to landlords.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> This conditionality is a result of the fact that Ricardo sees an instance in which the corn rent would be affected. This is if the improvement altered the productivity of labour unequally on different grades of land. This case, however, remains undeveloped by Ricardo, and it is unclear exactly what he has in mind.

<sup>171</sup> Ricardo here explicitly appeals to the consideration of landlords: “I hope I am not understood as undervaluing the

This concludes the key features – in relation to land – of Ricardo’s theorization of a national system of production and distribution in the *Principles*. However, it is a marked irony of the work that, in spite of the great weight of theoretical effort that is put into a detailed elucidation of this mechanism, what are obviously intended as the conclusions of the work seem to undermine the assumptions on which the whole analysis of rent and profit was predicated. This becomes clear in the chapter “On Foreign Trade”. As was noted in the previous section, key aspects of Ricardo’s political economy grew out of his engagement in the Corn Laws debates of 1815. The only references to the Corn Laws within the text is found in a small handful of comments on two pieces by other authors.<sup>172</sup> Yet it is commonly understood that the *Principles* represents a highly developed argument against the Corn Laws (e.g. Maneschi 2015). The apparent incongruity comes, therefore, when, having worked through in great detail the implications of the effect of population growth on rents and profits, Ricardo seems to remove the assumption, which was foundational to this analysis, that food is produced within the home territory of a country. Of course, this is no accident. The careful working out of the implications for national accumulation of the theory of rent clearly set up for the conclusion that it would be better to avoid these effects altogether by allowing for the importation of foodstuffs. Moreover, both the analysis of rent and profit, and the labour theory of value continue to inform the discussion when Ricardo turns to think about international trade.

It is not necessary here to go into the detail of Ricardo’s views on trade. However, the implications of this do have important consequences for the understanding of land. Within the space of only a few short pages, Ricardo lays out what is still remembered as his theory of “comparative advantage”. Smith had seemed to imply that trade would only happen if a good could be produced more cheaply in another country. Ricardo’s theory instead suggested that it was not the absolute

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importance of all sorts of improvements in agriculture to landlords—their immediate effect is to lower rent; but as they give a great stimulus to population, and at the same time enable us to cultivate poorer lands, with less labour, they are ultimately of immense advantage to landlords. A period however must elapse, during which they are positively injurious to him.” (PPET, 81n)

<sup>172</sup> One is Malthus’s *Observations on the corn laws* (Malthus 2001 [1815]), with which Ricardo disagrees on particular aspects of the theory of rent (see PPET, 408, 414), and the other is an article on “Corn Laws and Trade” in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which was written by McCulloch, which is cited in general approval of free trade (PPET, 267n, 318n).

cost (in terms of the input of labour) that was important, but rather the relative facility of producing different goods in a country that was the determining factor. If, his famous example ran, Portugal could produce wine more easily than cloth, and England could produce cloth more easily than wine, then both countries would gain by producing more of the good that they could make more easily and selling it to the other. Significantly, this was still the case even if Portugal could produce both commodities using less labour than they could be produced in England (PPET, 135-6). What mattered was the relative saving in terms of labour between goods produced in the same country, and it was this that a country stood to gain by trade.<sup>173</sup>

The implication of this theory is to promote something like an international division of labour, in which countries specialize in the production of fewer goods, and import those for which they have a comparative disadvantage in production.

Under a system of perfectly free commerce, each country naturally devotes its capital and labour to such employments as are most beneficial to each. This pursuit of individual advantage is admirably connected with the universal good of the whole. By stimulating industry, by rewarding ingenuity, and by using most efficaciously the peculiar powers bestowed by nature, it distributes labour most effectively and most economically: while, by increasing the general mass of productions, it diffuses general benefit, and binds together by one common tie of interest and intercourse, the universal society of nations throughout the civilized world. (PPET, 133-4)

Ricardo suggests that trade may improve the conditions for labourers by furnishing additional funds for their employment (PPET, 132). But the primary benefit is that it allows capital to pursue the most profitable employments possible within a given country. These are those in which it has “natural or artificial advantages”, such as those bestowed by “situation” or “climate” (*ibid.*), and which allow it to produce particular goods with relative facility compared to other countries.

Of course, returning to problem of scarcity of land, the implication is that, as agriculture becomes an increasingly unprofitable employment of capital, the natural response is to allow the importation of foodstuffs, in order to avoid the deleterious effects of declining profits.

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<sup>173</sup> In Ricardo’s example, if Portugal could produce wine with the labour of 80 men in one year, and cloth with 90, it would still be advantageous to import cloth from England, whose comparative advantage was in the production of cloth. This is in spite of the fact that Ricardo supposes cloth in England to require the labour of 100 men over a year, with wine costing 120. What matters is the relative saving of labour for each, making this a more profitable application of the nation’s capital. The reason that the absolute advantage is not relevant here, Ricardo makes clear is because of the relative immobility of capital, which cannot shift its employment to another country nearly so easily as it can within its own (PPET, 135-6).

It will appear then, that a country possessing very considerable advantages in machinery and skill, and which may therefore be enabled to manufacture commodities with much less labour than her neighbours, may, in return for such commodities, import a portion of the corn required for its consumption, even if its land were more fertile, and corn could be grown with less labour than in the country from which it was imported. (PPET, 136n)

Implicitly, therefore, the diagnosis for the contemporary situation of Britain was that the restriction on trade represented by the Corn Laws should be abolished. Countries with an abundance of uncultivated land might thus sell produce to Britain, which would in turn be able to free labour from unproductive employment on marginal land, allowing the nation to pursue its comparative advantage in manufactures.

The only remaining commentary is on taxation. Much of this is based on Smith's analysis. Whilst Ricardo disagrees on certain substantive points, it adds nothing conceptually to the understanding of land. Indeed, unlike Smith, the theoretical work of the text does not seem to be shaped in the same way by taxation as a central consideration.

Such is the total extent of Ricardo's discussion of land. Whilst I have necessarily summarized this discussion for purposes of concision, there is nothing within the *Principles* that adds substantively to the conceptual account of land, including very little in the way of "real world" illustration of Ricardo's arguments. What exists in some volume is a set of numerical analyses that, whilst interesting in their own right, are beyond the purview of the present investigation. In its own terms, Ricardo's system offers a fairly analytically coherent and persuasive account of the role of land within a system of production and distribution within a country, and also in the context of international trade. However, it should be obvious from the above that, in spite of the many obvious debts to Smith, the discussion of land here looks considerably different to what we found in *The Wealth of Nations*. It is considerably shorter, and certainly acts in a much narrower conceptual field. Gone in its entirety, for example, is the whole extended reflection on the town and country relation. Gone are the detailed discussions of the legal regulations of property and territory (the Corn Laws aside). Gone for the most part is the detailed account of subsistence that Smith offers, the whole analysis of land use change, and the consideration of soil fertility. Perhaps most fundamentally of all, gone is the conception of a material exchange that so strongly underpins Smith's political œconomy. The materiality of these processes of course remains implicit in



Ricardo's discussion of farming, and the specificity of "raw produce". But analytically, the focus is turned decisively onto prices, and any consideration of materiality beyond this explicitly excluded. In the following section, therefore, I try to tease out the precise nature of the theoretical change between Smith and Ricardo. I argue that, rather than simply a change in emphasis, or a purely methodological shift, Ricardo in fact constitutes his political economy on a radically new conceptual foundation, which is decisively not that shared by Smith.

## **Analysing the "break"**

As was noted in the introduction, a perennial line of critique levelled against Ricardo is his strong tendency towards abstraction. Indeed, following from the previous chapter on Smith, what is immediately clear from the above discussion is a change in tone. Whereas Smith offers a broad historical and sociological perspective, Ricardo's text sometimes seems to make the wider world in which the analysis of rents, profits, and wages takes place, barely visible. A number of commentators have demonstrated, however, in various ways, that aspects of Ricardo's theory are not as abstract or arbitrary as they might first appear. Matthew Watson's (2017) contextualization of Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, for example, demonstrates that Ricardo's seemingly hypothetical example of a trade in wine and cloth between Portugal and England, in fact parallels an important actually existing pattern of contemporary trade, albeit that Ricardo obscures the wider context of colonialism and slave-trading that under-pinned this exchange. Maxine Berg (1980) situates Ricardo's work in the context of a broad set of political, intellectual, and cultural debates around "the machinery question" in the early nineteenth century, which she suggests played a key role in the birth of political economic discourse at this time.<sup>174</sup> For the present purposes, the work of Mary Morgan is especially relevant (Morgan 2012). This demonstrates that the form taken by Ricardo's reasoning about agriculture in fact ties in closely with a number of contemporary debates. His use of numerical accounts, for example, parallels the ways in which the results of the newly popular experimental farming trials were assessed in contemporary journals. Some of Ricardo's reasoning about the application of additional labour in agriculture,

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<sup>174</sup> In situating the "birth" of political economic discourse in the early nineteenth century, and with Ricardo in particular, Berg similarly seems to follow Tribe's account of the reconfigurations of economic discourse (1978).

meanwhile, is shown to reflect contemporary debates amongst landlords as to the most cost-effective way of dealing with the unemployed.<sup>175</sup>

Nevertheless, what is of primary concern to the present investigation is not the extent to which the topics with which Ricardo engaged were relevant at the time he wrote – they clearly were – but rather what his theoretical apparatus makes visible of the world he analyses, particularly through the way it conceptualizes land. In what follows, I move beyond Ricardo’s own critiques of Smith to look at the extent to which his work departs from the theoretical ground of *The Wealth of Nations*. Indeed, looked at in this way, it becomes clear that some of these critiques are the result of important conceptual shifts that Ricardo himself does not acknowledge. The argument here therefore goes beyond a suggestion that Ricardo departed from Smith on key points of method, or the focus of analysis. Rather, I follow the line of argument put forward by Foucault, Tribe, and others that sees Ricardo’s work as marking an epistemological “break” with earlier discourses. Compared to these accounts, the analysis here is more narrowly restricted to the relationship between Smith and Ricardo. But nevertheless, looking at their divergent conceptions of land reveals what can certainly be described as a break in this respect.

We saw in Chapter Three the centrality of a historical form of investigation in Smith’s work, both in the form of conjectural “natural” history and what J.G.A. Pocock termed “civil”, or narrative history. As I argued there, this was far from incidental to Smith’s approach, but was instead at the heart of his “science” of political œconomy. Ricardo’s *Principles* contains almost nothing in the way of narrative history. Some commentators, however, have seen him as an adherent of the stadial model of conjectural history. Nathaniel Wolloch, for example, makes a lot of Ricardo’s references to a society of hunters in the chapter on value, seeing this as a clear demonstration of the Enlightenment heritage of his thought, and evidence that he, like Smith, “relied on the four stages theory” (2017, 80). But I suggest that this a misreading. In the preceding chapters, we saw that, for Smith, stadial history was above all concerned with the evolution of modes of societal subsistence – central to which are shifts in the relationship to land – and the institutional forms to

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<sup>175</sup> This is what Morgan terms the “spade-husbandry debate”. The issue was whether it was better to employ additional labour on farms unprofitably, or for the unemployed to be supported by the system of parish poor relief, which was funded by the landowners of the parish (Morgan 2012, pp. 69–73)

which these shifts give rise. In borrowing the idea of a society of hunters from *The Wealth of Nations*, Ricardo rather wants to pursue much more narrowly a thought experiment developing Smith's notion that in such societies labour seems to be the only possible principle that could govern exchange. The society of pure labour exchange therefore provides a convenient starting point from which Ricardo can extend this reasoning to analyse the labour embodied in forms of capital.

This, though, does not constitute an adherence to the stadial historical thesis. In fact, this is the only passage in which Ricardo invokes one of Smith's individual societal stages directly. There is no reference in the work to the other stages of shepherding or husbandry, and not even a single mention of the term "commercial society" which was so fundamental to *The Wealth of Nations*. Rather, Ricardo invokes the notion of stages of development in an extremely loose manner. Indeed, his lack of attentiveness to the content of the stadial thesis is demonstrated by the fact that on a number of occasions he refers to the idea of stages whilst simultaneously talking about rents. For example,

[w]e have shewn that in early stages of society, both the landlord's and the labourer's share of the value of the produce of the earth, would be but small (PPET, 112)

Here, in contradiction to the example in the discussion of value, Ricardo's imagination of the "early stages" of society seems to invoke a kind of *tabula rasa*, an unpopulated territory, but with all the institutions of a modern commercial society – something, in other words, that would have made absolutely no sense within the Smithian stadial history framework.<sup>176</sup> As such quotes demonstrate, to the extent that Ricardo thinks in stages at all, it is in terms of his hypothetical "grades" of land that are successively taken into cultivation.

The appeal to stadial history is, in fact, a purely formal one, divested of any content. If anything, Ricardo relies solely on a much simpler general notion of "progress". Most crucially, the solely vestigial rendering of the stadial device is indicative of the wholesale removal of the great body of historical jurisprudence on which the analysis of *The Wealth of Nations* is founded. This is both in the stadial form of the natural law tradition, and in the accompanying empirical investigation of

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<sup>176</sup> Instead, this kind of imaginary is closer to how Smith thinks about colonies – Britain's North American colonies being the key example. Ricardo passes no comment on this contradiction though.

the development of laws that was so important to Smith's work. As such, it is unsurprising that we simultaneously see in Ricardo's work the near total disappearance of any kind of detailed consideration of either property or territory.

Ricardo's comments on property are scarce, and are mostly confined to his discussion of taxation. Here, he nominally follows Smith's maxims regarding the principles of justice in taxation. Whilst disagreeing with Smith on a number of points regarding the effects of particular taxes, consistently with his own analysis of production and distribution, this discussion adds very little conceptually. In fact, the only direct commentary on property in itself comes in two comments in which Ricardo emphasizes the importance of the "security of property". In one he refers to this as, "that principle which should ever be held sacred" (PPET, 204). The other decries the evils of a lack of security of property, which he suggests is the result of "bad government", and results in a population that "presses against the means of subsistence" (PPET, 99). Whilst the emphasis on the security of property is clearly consistent with Smith, Ricardo's rendering of this argument negates the historicity which is central to Smith's analysis. In particular, it does away with the notion, so prominent in Smith's writing, that property emerges out of a complex set of factors taking into account, variously, the power relations in the society, the requirements of production, and, most fundamentally, the way in which the mode of subsistence mediates processes of material exchange between humans, and with the nonhuman environment. Instead, Ricardo takes the form of existing property relations as a given.

A key difference in the conception of property is also seen in the treatment of capital. In Chapter Five, it was argued that in Smith's work there is a clear distinction between the concepts of stock and capital, albeit one that is implicit, and not applied rigorously. Smith seems to use stock to refer to the accumulated property of an individual, whilst capital denotes instead the productive employment of an accumulated resource. I also suggested that this distinction points to the divergent intellectual historical derivations of these ideas: the former from the tradition of natural jurisprudence, and the latter from Physiocracy, with its emphasis on the circulation of a product. In Smith's analytical schema, these ideas are combined. Capital, conceived in relation to circulation, is necessarily connected to the prior notion of stock, as accumulated resources. Ricardo continues to use both words, but dissolves both the distinction between them, and the

connections to jurisprudence and circulation on which this was based. As Keith Tribe notes, the association of capital both with personal wealth, and with circulation is broken (1978, pp. 140–1).<sup>177</sup> In Ricardo, as Tribe goes on to say, a new concept of capital emerges. This is one in which capital,

is simply the means to further production, and conceived as such there can be no internal limit to its accumulation (1978, 141)

For the present purposes, this shift is highly significant. In Chapter Five it was demonstrated that stock and capital are, for Smith, intimately connected to land. In both cases, there is an intellectual historical connection with a concern for the materiality of resources. In the tradition of natural jurisprudence this manifested as a concern for the ways in which the gathering and accumulation of resources from the land is governed by legal institutions. In Physiocracy, whilst the process of exchange and distribution is conceived and analysed in monetary terms, capital remains tied to the notion of circulation that gives motion to this exchange, and which has its foundation in the physical productivity of the land. In Smith, these ideas dovetail neatly, and it is a process of material exchange, mediated by relations of property that effects the reproduction of capitals. For Ricardo, the reproduction of capital is conceived solely in terms of the realization of exchangeable value in production. Even when, in the case of agriculture, this production is conceived in terms of the distribution of a “corn” product, as was noted above, this remains a largely abstract notion, with corn acting as a proxy for subsistence goods in general.

A similar argument can be made in relation to property in land. As was noted above, Ricardo’s purely formal invocation of the stadial thesis presents this in a way which is at odds with Smith’s account. The question of the historical evolution of property in land, or even the nature of contemporary capitalistic property rights, does not feature as part of the analysis. Ricardo’s analysis does, like Smith’s, place emphasis on the notion of improvement in agriculture. But, as outlined above, this sees the responsibility for improvements as lying solely with the tenant, rather than also with the landlord. For Smith, the nature of property rights was something to be

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<sup>177</sup> On circulation, Tribe notes that this remains important, “only in so far as it denotes the arena in which the price mechanism operates, and... can affect the allocation of capital via the category of population (1978, 140). It is worth re-iterating, however, that my interpretation of Smith differs from this analysis of Tribe’s. Tribe find’s Smith “baffled” by thought based around circulation. But I have suggested that this is a misreading.

investigated in order to understand the interests of both landlord and tenant, and so the prospects for improvement. Moreover, Smith is primarily interested in long-term improvements that fix wealth in the property itself. Ricardo, instead, is interested more simply in the profits of the farmer.

If Ricardo says little about property, he has even less to say about territory. The word appears in the text of the *Principles* only twice, both times within direct quotations from Smith (PPET 375, 408). This is in stark contrast to *The Wealth of Nations*, where, as was seen in Chapter Six, Smith used the word regularly in a variety of contexts. In terms of vocabulary, in places where Smith would almost certainly have referred to territory, Ricardo uses simply the word “country”. This shift is in itself significant. Territory, as Foucault puts it, is a juridico-political notion (Foucault, quoted in Elden 2010, 9).<sup>178</sup> As with property, the shift is again away from a political and legal framing of the discourse to one which focusses more narrowly on a system of production and distribution. Of course, the territorial framing of political economy as a whole remains intact. This is ensured both by the fact that the analysis addresses dynamics of production within a territory, and by the continuing concern with taxation, which ties the discourse back to the state. The key facets of a territory, for Ricardo, seem to be that it contains a fixed quantity of land, a population, and a supply of capital.

Ricardo, like Smith, was very concerned with the problem of the state debt, which was similarly a cause for concern following the Napoleonic Wars as it had been in the period Smith was writing, following the Seven Years War. Whereas Smith, however, saw the remedy in ensuring wealth was fixed, for the long term, within the territory by improving lands, Ricardo’s solution was to focus on the productivity of labour. His prescription was to ensure the ongoing accumulation of the capital that employed this labour by dealing with those factors that might serve to diminish profits. Key in this respect, of course, is his notion of comparative advantage. But, as was noted above, in spite of the theorization of production and distribution focussing on activity *within* a given country, the implication that subsistence goods should be traded internationally, if profitable, means that one of the defining features of a territory – its limited supply of land – is displaced

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<sup>178</sup> Elden qualifies this by suggesting that, whilst territory is indeed a juridical and political concept, it is not exclusively so, emphasizing in particular the calculative and technical practices that also comprise territory. Nevertheless, for the present purposes, Foucault’s emphasis on the connection to law remains useful.

beyond the purview of analysis. Once, that is, the subsistence of a population is to be provided by the international market, the negative effects of rising agricultural rents can be forestalled indefinitely. Moreover, as Ricardo's analysis demonstrated, it is not necessary to know anything about land use and the conditions of production within another country in order to understand the benefit of a trade to the home country. This can be understood solely in terms of the relative facility of production of goods within the home territory.

This move is crucial. The uncoupling of territory from subsistence allows for a radically different conception of wealth. For Smith, of course, "wealth" was the primary focus of analysis, and, as such, he insisted on a precise definition which proposed that this consisted in the annual produce of the land and labour. Ricardo, instead, rarely invokes the notion of wealth, and when he does, it is not clearly defined.<sup>179</sup> The closest he gets is when he states that,

it will be seen that the wealth of a country may be increased in two ways: it may be increased by employing a greater portion of revenue in the maintenance of productive labour,—which will not only add to the quantity, but to the value of the mass of commodities; or it may be increased, without employing any additional quantity of labour, by making the same quantity more productive,—which will add to the abundance, but not to the value of commodities. (PPET, 278)

Here Ricardo claims to be opposing Smith's view. But in doing so he is really taking issue again with Smith's views on value – as opposed to wealth – even though these are clearly distinct concepts for Smith. This is in itself indicative. From what Ricardo says, wealth is equivalent to the quantity and productivity of the labour employed within a country. This is true regardless of the nature of its employment – though of course, in his view, free trade internationally will allow the country to maximize productivity by specializing in those goods for which it has a comparative advantage in production. In other words, wealth, for Ricardo, is seen as the maximization of exchangeable value, effectively negating wealth as a concept in its own right. This is very different to Smith, for whom wealth and value are clearly entirely different categories.

Underpinning this shift is, of course, Ricardo's altered conceptualization of value. As was seen above, Ricardo jettisons the whole sphere of use values, which were so central to Smith's account

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<sup>179</sup> Tellingly, the chapter in which this topic is dealt with most directly is titled, "Value and Riches, their Distinctive Properties" (PPET, ch.XX). In contrasting value to "riches" rather than "wealth", Ricardo uses a category that for Smith was more closely aligned with wealth of an individual, rather than a society.

of the relationship between human labour and the earth. This immediately displaces any consideration of the “spontaneous productions” of the soil beyond the purview of analysis, and any consideration of subsistence outside of marketized capitalistic production – the rather superficial reference to hunting societies aside. Moreover, this shift is indicative of an important conceptual slippage. Smith’s suggestion that labour must have constituted the first measure of exchangeable value was clearly based on a conception of human labour in general, prior to any kind of mediation by property relations. This kind of labour – the “toil and trouble” (WN I.v.2, 47) that the procurement of a good necessitates – is clearly conceptually distinct from the variety of forms of property relations that Smith considers, under which individuals have laboured in different places and at different times, including in capitalistic relations of production. Ricardo, however, seems to neglect this important distinction, instead eliding wage-labour with the notion of a labour-measure in exchange. Ricardo’s reasoning follows Smith in the idea that the return due to the capitalist or landlord in production is not proportioned to the input of their labour, and cannot therefore be conceived as a payment *for* labour. However, he proceeds on the basis of his own assumption that, therefore, the only input of labour that is relevant is that of the wage labourer. Smith avoided this path, insisting that the idea of labour as the measure of exchange was only an “abstract notion” (WN I.v.5, 49). Instead, he turned to corn and gold as indicators, respectively, of long- and short-term variations in value.

This is not a purely analytical point, but rather it denotes a fundamental shift in the premises of the discourse. Ricardo conflates the notion of the labour-measure and that of wage-labour as a social relation, and proceeds to reason that the amount of wage-labour involved in the production of a particular good determines the value of that good. For Smith, instead, the labour-measure concept exists prior to the property relations governing production. This is not least because, as Smith is well aware, at different stages of societal development, a varying number of goods can be acquired not through the market. It is in this sense that I suggested in Chapter Four that value, for Smith, always expresses a relationship between labour and land. That is to say, the “toil and trouble” that it costs to acquire anything is always determined by the complex set of exchange relations – both marketized exchanges amongst humans, and exchanges between human beings and the earth – that contribute to the production or procurement of a good. Value in this sense, is irreducibly relational for Smith. For Ricardo, by contrast, value is the attribute of an individual



product.<sup>180</sup>

Another important shift in relation to Smith's "earth" register comes in Ricardo's altered conception of nature. For Smith, in the process of production, the action of nature is specifically associated with the earth. It is in the productivity of the soil that nature "labours along with man" (WN II.v.12, 363). As we saw in one of the quotes above, Ricardo directly counters this view, asking why nature should be seen as doing nothing for man in manufactures (PPEI, 76n). Ricardo mentions a number of other possible "gifts" of nature (*ibid.*), including water, air, and heat. But, in the quoted passage and elsewhere, it seems the issue he is truly concerned with is the use of steam power, which he thinks should be viewed as one of the "natural aids" (PPEI, 69) to production. This equation of steam with the powers of nature is a significant shift. This is partly because it displaces the theoretical centrality of agriculture.<sup>181</sup> More fundamentally, however, it shifts the focus from the physical productivity of land – its capacity to yield material goods – towards a conception of the powers of nature that emphasizes their capacity to abridge labour.

This brings us to the final and most essential point. The key aim of the earlier chapters on Adam Smith were to demonstrate that Smith's political economy is conceived in terms of a set of physical processes. In Chapter Four, I described this in terms of a process of material exchange, which is first and foremost one between humans and the earth, and only secondarily between humans. Moreover, these processes are understood in terms of a necessary relationship between humans and the earth which is conceived in material terms, and only secondarily in terms of the mediation of this relationship through relations of property and the dynamics of markets. Ricardo not only ignores this more natural historical foundation in Smith's theory, but he actively opposes the idea that political economy should be conceived in terms of a set of physical processes. To borrow terminology from subsequent economics, we can say that what Ricardo is interested in is solely the returns due to the three "factors of production": land, labour, and capital. Land, in this

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<sup>180</sup> Ricardo of course pays note to relative changes in value, but continues to hold out the hope of finding an invariable measure of exchange (see PPEI, ch. I, §VI). On the search for an invariable measure of value as a lifelong struggle for Ricardo, see Faccarello (2015).

<sup>181</sup> In this respect, commentary that stresses the centrality of agriculture in Ricardo's system, based in particular on the emphasis on rents (e.g. Wolloch 2017, 80), is somewhat misleading. Schabas, instead, notes Ricardo's apparent desire to emphasize the increasing importance of manufacturing (2009, 114).

schema, has various special attributes (namely its limited extent, and its variable fertility) that define the nature of its “factor return”, rent. But it is essentially this return – the stream of value due to the landlord – and its proportion to the other factor returns, that is the sole concern. The same is true of both labour and capital. They are conceived narrowly in terms of their own returns, wages and profits. The key problem, for Ricardo is to determine the law-like principles that govern the quantitative relations between these. Indeed, the extent of the shift away from Smith’s understanding of land is not only in the reduction of land to rent, however. It is also in the divestment of the concepts of labour and capital of their own intimate connections to land. For Smith, labour and capital are both also understood in terms of a relationship to the earth. Labour, as I suggested above, is always undertaken in relation to the earth. Capital is itself an accumulation of the products of the earth, and must be restored or replenished by those same products. As such, all form elements of a process of material exchange. In Ricardo, the notion of a material exchange disappears and is replaced by a much more abstract set of reflections about value.

## Conclusion

To what extent, then, do these dissimilarities between Smith and Ricardo really constitute a “break”, rather than simply differences in their chosen approaches? In concluding, it is useful to return to the work of Keith Tribe. In Tribe’s earlier *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse*, one of his key points is that the novelty of political economy, as given its classic expression by Ricardo, is that it does not suppose the existence of a polity as a pre-condition for the discourse. Rather its “arena of investigation... is constituted discursively by its theories of production and distribution” (Tribe 1978, 145). What Tribe means by this is that key concepts are no longer defined in political or legal terms (*ibid.*, 127), but rather by a discursively self-sustaining set of conceptual relations within a theory of production and distribution. My argument here is related, but with a somewhat different focus.<sup>182</sup>

I have suggested that Smith’s discussion of land can be understood to be conducted in three inter-

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<sup>182</sup> Tribe’s focus, both here and in his more recent work (2015), is on the constitution of the human agent, in particular. As was suggested in Chapter Two, in spite of the title of Tribe’s earlier work, land plays a somewhat subsidiary role.

related but distinct registers – earth, property, and territory. I have also tried to suggest that the form that these registers take is a function of the way Smith sets up his investigation with its foundation in a natural historical and jurisprudential account of the development of human societies. Ricardo clearly draws on some of Smith’s conceptual categories. But whilst Smith reasoned in terms of general principles, Ricardo imposed his own understanding of science that demanded that these were hardened into “laws”. In the process, Ricardo abstracted away much of the discursive foundation of Smith’s work, grounded as it was in a broad array of legal, administrative, and material practices, and produced instead a matrix of concepts which were – as Tribe suggests – discursively self-sustaining. Not only was it not necessary to conceive of a polity as a pre-condition of Ricardo’s political economy, it was not necessary to conceive, in any substantial sense, of a relationship between human societies and the earth. In effect, he created a new, and what we might call a properly “economic” concept of land, reduced to the barest characteristics of its scarcity and its yield. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, this was indeed the path that post-Ricardian economics took. Furthermore, I also suggested there that from this prior reduction of land to its “factor returns”, it was only a relatively small further step to reach the conclusion that land, in fact can be understood as a form of capital, at which point – as a concept in its own right – land ceases to hold any special significance for economic analysis.

# Conclusions

## Summary of the thesis

This thesis has enquired into land as a concept. In particular, it has looked at the emergence of what I have termed a specifically “economic” concept of land. I have argued that the putative birth of modern economic thought, in the work of Adam Smith, in fact rested on a far richer and more nuanced conception of land than is generally recognized. This is one that sees land in broad natural historical and jurisprudential terms: as earth, property, and territory. I demonstrated that this is simultaneously one that understands land in resolutely material terms, paying detailed attention to a diversity of practices that constitute human relations to land, and, indeed, through which the concept of land itself is made legible. I argued that in this conceptual context market exchange is better understood as a subset of a much broader field of “material exchange” that characterized human subsistence. These material exchanges are both those amongst humans, but also between humans and the earth itself. I subsequently demonstrated that it is therefore not in Smith’s work, but rather in the later political economy of David Ricardo that we can see the birth of what can properly be termed – in disciplinary terms – an “economic” concept of land. Crucially, this involves the rejection, by Ricardo, of the detailed account of the materiality of subsistence on which Smith’s work was premised, and a move to conceiving of land narrowly in terms of the revenues it yields. In making this move, I argued that Ricardo’s approach should not be understood as simply different to Smith’s, but in fact as constructing its whole analysis on an entirely different conceptual basis, an epistemological “break” which set the key foundations for subsequent economic thought.

Chapter One investigated the nature of an “economic” concept of land, and the longer trajectory of its development within economic thought. Here, following the work of Keith Tribe, I first explored the heterogeneous understandings of land found in the various discourses frequently cited as forerunners of political economy, as well as touching on the legal developments that were necessary for an economic concept of land to emerge. I also followed a line of argument developed by Tribe, and based on the earlier work of Michel Foucault, that suggests that a specifically

economic domain of thought cannot be understood to emerge until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in, in particular in the work of Ricardo. The second section thus looked at what I suggested can be understood as a specifically “classical” economic understanding of land in the tradition following Ricardo, and how this was subsequently transformed by neoclassical economists into a conception of land merely as a species of capital, rather than a distinct “factor of production” in its own right. The final section argued that what was importantly at stake in this move was the question of whether the returns to land were conferred by a spatial monopoly. The neoclassical refutation of this argument (as expressed most forcefully by John Bates Clark) resulted in a view of land that, as Doreen Massey noted, was fundamentally a-spatial. Yet, I argued that this highly abstract account of land as solely a species of capital could be read as a logical development of the “classical”, Ricardian view, which had already associated land narrowly with its “factor returns”.

This broad sweep of the development of conceptualizations of land in the longer history of economic thought set the stage for the subsequent investigation, which sought to identify how an understanding of land solely in terms of the returns that it yielded emerged. Before turning to the substantive aspect of this investigation, however, Chapter Two sought to engage with the particular methodological issues arising from such an investigation, due, in particular, to the persistent historiographical tendencies within the history of economic thought that had contributed to a neglect of land. I argued that dominant approaches both in the history of economic thought and in the historicist literatures were ill-equipped to take into account the possibility of shifting scientific rationalities and their relationship to the materiality of the world. In response, I turned to Foucault, looking at how his work was strongly influenced by a particular tradition in the history and philosophy of science. I suggested that his focus on discourse, and on the relationship between discourse and practice in particular provided a much more solid philosophical grounding for the present investigation. However, Foucault’s own comments on the relation between discourse and materiality are not well developed, and so I turned to the more recent work of Karen Barad, whose notion of the “apparatus” can be seen to specify the relationship between discourse, practice, and materiality much more thoroughly. Finally, proposing to adopt a broadly genealogical approach to look at the development of understandings of land, I turned to the work of Stuart Elden to see how such an approach could be applied to the

reading of texts. I argued that Elden's emphasis on a multi-faceted history of thought methodology, and his attention to the relationship between word, concept, and practice were particularly instructive for the present investigation.

Having established these philosophical and methodological parameters framing the present investigation, I turned in Chapter Three to the central focus of the analysis, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The chapter argued that reading this work today poses specific problems of interpretation, especially in light of its exceptional fame and influence. Building on the discussion of historiographical issues in the history of economic thought in Chapter Two, I suggested that popular understandings of the text, both in academia and beyond, interpret this as Smith's "economic" text, and thus bring to bear a number of assumptions about the nature of a specifically economic domain of analysis when reading the text. It is largely for this reason, I suggested, that land has been widely neglected in the voluminous commentary on Smith. I argued that, in this respect, the more historicist literature provides a helpful starting point for re-orienting a reading of the text away from the conceptual parameters of subsequent economics. I looked in particular at two meta-theoretical aspects of the work, science and history, arguing that the connection between these was not incidental, but rather that, for Smith, political oeconomic, as a "science of statecraft", was in fact founded on an intricate "natural history" of the development of modes of subsistence in human societies. I suggested that by looking at these aspects of the text, and the overarching arguments Smith makes, the importance of land within the text already starts to become visible. However, the final part of the chapter argued that in order to understand the theoretical centrality of land to the work, a more detailed reading was necessary. The chapter thus finished by introducing a heuristic device, proposing that the conception of land in the work could be understood to operate on three distinct "registers" which corresponded to three key adjacent concepts: earth, property, and territory.

Chapter Four introduced the first of these registers, earth. Here, building on the account of Smith's employment of history in the previous chapter, I emphasized the centrality of a natural historical mode of reasoning to the construction of the text. This was seen in particular through Smith's detailed account of the development of modes of societal subsistence. I suggested that this earth register foregrounds the materiality of subsistence, which is conceived in terms of an

evolving relationship between human labour and the nonhuman environment. Section one looked at the earth as a concept in Smith's work, and particularly the importance of an understanding of humans as a species subsisting from the earth. Section two focussed on how Smith discusses subsistence relations through the concepts of labour and "productions of the earth". I suggested that the procurement of goods here is understood in resolutely material terms, exploring Smith's account of the effects of increasing cultivation of land in settled societies to the availability of various kinds of subsistence goods. In section three, I showed how this understanding of a shifting relationship between land and labour leads Smith to provide an account of progressive land use change which simultaneously sees him engaging with problems of soil fertility. The chapter concluded that, positing an understanding of societal subsistence in terms of processes of "material exchange", of which market exchange is merely a subset, this earth register is foundational to Smith's conception of land, and indeed the construction of the text as a whole.

In Chapter Five it was argued that property constitutes a second register in which land is conceptualized within *The Wealth of Nations*. It demonstrated that, whilst a key topic in its own right for Smith, property is understood in terms entirely consistent with the kind of natural historical account of subsistence seen in his earth register. Crucially, I argued that property is not understood as a reified category by Smith, but as a societal institution that emerges through the necessity of mediating processes of material exchange. More specifically, I suggested that Smith draws on the tradition of natural jurisprudence, and particularly the work of Hugo Grotius, in understanding the emergence of institutions of property as a result of the changing relationship between human societies and the nonhuman environment, particularly through pressures of population. In this context, understanding the place of land within the text was seen to require not only taking account of the way in which land itself is seen to become property (although this is important), but also of the way in which all goods – and, by extension, all forms of capital and commodities – are also understood as ultimately the products of land. The first section looked at Smith's conjectural account of the development of property as a key aspect of shifting modes of societal subsistence. The second section looked at how this same understanding can be seen, in negative form, within Smith's account of the "unnatural" history of property in European feudal societies. In the third section, I turned more explicitly to the analysis of market exchange for which the work is most famous, demonstrating how some of its key categories are indeed built on

Smith's detailed historical account of subsistence, and, in particular, demonstrating how here land remains a central concern.

Chapter Six looked at the final of the three registers in which land is conceived within the text, that of territory. It argued that this was understood not simply as a container for processes of production and exchange, but again in very material terms, as comprising a set of concrete practices that serve as an additional level of mediation to the material exchanges made visible in Smith's earth register. Whereas property was seen to mediate exchanges at the level of the individual, so territory mediates exchange at the level of the state. The first section discussed Smith's use of the term territory, and the key distinction between home and colonial territories. The second addressed the crucial epistemological role of territory. It suggested that by posing a number of questions around how the state can best mobilize its resources, Smith's political economy adopts a gaze which places territory as its primary object. In doing so, I argued, land is assigned a key role, both theoretically and epistemically. Following on from this, the third section looked at the strategies adopted by Smith to provide an empirical account of territory, in the context of very limited statistical information. The fourth section completed this analysis by looking at Smith's proposals for the mobilization of wealth via taxation. Through this analysis, the chapter revealed the variety of ways in which territory placed land at the centre of analysis. Yet, it simultaneously demonstrated that territory, in this theoretical account, is not simply reducible to the area of land that a particular territory encompasses.

Finally, having finished the investigation of Adam Smith, Chapter Seven completed my argument by turning to David Ricardo's *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. It argued that, whilst avowedly following the theoretical foundations put forward by Smith, Ricardo's work in fact established political economy on a radically new conceptual footing, one which conceived of land solely in terms of its "factor returns". I suggested that Ricardo conflated the three registers of earth, property, and territory, in which I had suggested Smith conceived of land, dissolving the intricate web of conceptual connections seen around land in Smith's work, and replacing this with a much narrower association of land with rent. Crucially, however, I demonstrated that, seemingly unconsciously, Ricardo jettisoned the notion of a material exchange that I suggested was so crucial within *The Wealth of Nations*. The first section introduced Ricardo's work and its context. The



second, longer section, gave an account of the theoretical structure of Ricardo's *Principles*, focussing on aspects relevant to land, and particularly on his famous accounts of rent and value. On the basis of this, the third section then demonstrated how Ricardo's work could be seen to constitute a "break" with the theoretical conceptual foundations of Smith's work. The chapter concluded by recalling the investigation of Chapter One. It suggested that, in reducing land narrowly to its "factor return" of rent, Ricardo defined the ground upon which the subsequent tradition of economic developed, paving the way for the subsequent conflation of land and capital, and the subsequent relegation of land as an object of economic analysis.

Whilst the substantive concern of this investigation has been with the development of economic theory, as I suggested in the Introduction of the thesis, its contributions to knowledge go beyond the immediate field of the history of economic thought, and may be of interest to scholars across a range of disciplines. These contributions operate on four main levels. Firstly, especially through the analysis carried out in the Chapters Three to Six, the thesis provides a much more thoroughgoing account of the concept of land within Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* than is to be found in the existing literature. In doing so, however, it simultaneously contributes to a reinterpretation of this key canonical work that places land's materiality at the centre of its analysis. Secondly, as was particularly visible in Chapter Seven, the thesis also adds more broadly to understandings of the history of economic thought by identifying a "break" between Smith's conception of land, and that found in the work of David Ricardo. Ricardo, I demonstrated, created a new and recognizably modern economic concept of land. But in demonstrating this, I simultaneously showed that his work defined a new and specifically economic domain of analysis precisely by separating the monetary flows associated with land from a broader consideration of land's role in sustaining life and human societies as a whole. Thirdly, the heuristic device of the three "registers" of earth, property, and territory was proposed specifically as a way of reading land in Smith's work. This strategy demonstrates an alternative to dominant (political) economic understandings of land that helps to makes visible the complex nature of land both as a concept and as part of the social world. As such, it may be of use for those seeking to do further conceptual work around land, including additional work on the treatment of land within existing bodies of theory. Finally, in retracing a genealogy of land, as a key concept through which the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds is understood, this thesis as a whole joins current

efforts to rethink the foundations of contemporary economic theory, raising questions, in particular, about the necessity and validity of basing economic theory on a purely monetary conceptualization of land.

## **Returning to economy and ecology**

It seems important now to return to the point of departure for this investigation, by reflecting on what I suggested was the tension seen today between economy and ecology. Up to this point, I have deliberately used these terms sparingly, in order to place the focus more squarely on land as a concept, and how that has been understood in the works studied. I have talked a lot about Smith's political *economy*, and Ricardo's political *economy*, maintaining the specific words used by each author as a helpful reminder of their divergent conceptual foundations. I have deliberately not, however, talked in terms of what these authors say about "the economy" or "economic processes", as I have taken the view that to do so in this kind of conceptual study is to risk unhelpfully imposing more recent understandings of the nature of a specifically "economic" domain of activity. I hope to have demonstrated that this is particularly important in the case of Smith, for whom the analytical concerns taken to fall within the remit of political *economy* were of quite a different order from those Ricardo saw as comprising the remit of political *economy*, and indeed from those of interest to later economists. For similar reasons, the term ecology, which was not familiar to either author has been, for the most part, avoided.

Yet, in light of the analysis carried out in this thesis, returning to the categories of economy and ecology provides an important opportunity to reflect in more general terms on the implication of my arguments. I have shown that *The Wealth of Nations* pays significant attention to a number of concerns that we would today understand as ecological. These are visible in Smith's discussions of, for example, soil fertility, land use change, changes in the populations and condition of wild plants and animals, and deforestation – all issues that in Chapter Four I discussed as part of the "earth" register. From the vantage point of today, when unregulated industry is so often associated with various forms of environmental harm, acknowledging Smith's attention to such ecological considerations seems to sit unhappily with the popular image of him as the doctrinaire proponent

of free trade and *laissez-faire*. It should be clear from what has been said that this popular image results from a highly reductive account of Smith's work as a whole. Nevertheless, even more detailed and historically sensitive approaches must by necessity recognize the emphasis Smith placed on the beneficent effects of a "system of natural liberty", free from artificial restrictions to trade and industry.

How, then, should we reconcile Smith's apparent sensitivity to such ecological factors with his insistence on the ameliorative effects of markets? The work of Fredrik Jonsson (2010, 2013) hints at one potential answer to this. Jonsson points out that, although, as we have seen, Smith made use of a wide variety of sources, including those from travelling botanists in the colonies such as Pehr Kalm, a lot of his conclusions were drawn from the recent experience in lowland Scotland. Here, increases in the price of cattle following Scotland's Union with England in 1707 had led to a chain of positive effects. Cattle numbers were increased, meaning a greater supply of fertilizer for soils, and this led to the improvement of agriculture, which in turn became understood as a crucial engine of progress in general. Indeed, Jonsson goes as far as to say that, "without high cattle prices, there would be no surplus manure and no Scottish Enlightenment" (Jonsson 2010, 1354). Smith, it seems, took this specific chain of events as indication of a more general set of principles regarding the beneficent effects of the extension of markets on the improvement of land, and the attendant rapid development of society.

As Jonsson points out, Smith was distinctive amongst many of his contemporaries in taking this "liberal" approach to improvement. As we saw in Chapter Four, the natural historians of the Linnaean tradition instead saw the necessity of a careful and purposive management of nature. Improvement, for them, was something to be achieved only via the development of specialist expertise in the management of plant and animal life in relation to prevailing climactic conditions. This expertise took the form of globe-spanning networks of natural historians who searched colonial territories for flora and fauna that could be cultivated in Europe in order to maximize productivity in the home territories. For Smith, it seems, the example of lowland Scotland appeared to demonstrate the redundancy of such efforts, and the ameliorative effects of simply allowing industry to take its "natural" course. The improvement of the earth, that is, could be encouraged most effectively simply by removing impediments to the development of markets.

The account provided by this thesis of Smith's conceptualization of land makes this view clearly visible. Whilst it is the responsibility of the legislator to ensure an optimal legal framing of relations of production, it is ultimately the action of markets that – in a commercial society – guarantees the progress of improvement. Whilst Smith himself paid significant attention to a number of what we might now consider “ecological” concerns around land, then, the specific conclusions he reached suggested that these were not *directly* the areas in which the statesman should seek to intervene. Rather, it was by allowing the action of markets to operate uninhibited that the legislator could most effectively ensure the “improvement” of the earth.

This was a significant conclusion, and, indeed, in this sense, Smith *did* lay important foundations for the development of subsequent economics. Ricardo, it seems, took these conclusions at face value, reasoning that, therefore, the material nature of the relationship between humans and the earth could be ignored, and that, instead, the purely monetary dynamics of market exchange were in themselves a sufficient domain of analysis for political economy. He proceeded to (re)construct a form of analysis based solely upon exchangeable value, apparently entirely unconscious of the fact that, in doing so, he was radically altering the discursive foundations of the analysis that he drew from Smith. Indeed, how little he seems to have recognized this shift is shown by the fact – illustrated in Chapter Seven – that he then went on to critique Smith for conceiving of exchange relations in physical terms, rather than solely in terms of an exchange of (monetary) value. It was only on the basis of taking Smith's own conclusions for granted, then, that Ricardo was able to eliminate the sphere of material exchange from his analysis in its entirety. But this simultaneously made it impossible within a Ricardian framework (and indeed within that of subsequent economics) to critique Smith's conclusions regarding the positive effects of markets in effecting the “improvement” of the earth.

Yet, in spite of the fact that Smith's own conclusions suggested that the improvement of the earth was best effected by the uninhibited action of markets (given certain legal pre-requisites), his analysis, as I have described it in this thesis, surely cannot be thought of as sanctioning the move made by Ricardo. I have tried to show that Smith's whole approach within *The Wealth of Nations* consisted in arguing that the legislator must be equipped with a knowledge of the general principles

of human subsistence, in order that the “police” of modern states could be understood in a sufficiently broad context. That is to say, it was crucial for Smith that the regulation of commercial society was conceptualized in terms of the specificity of this kind of society as a set of relations between humans and the earth. Even whilst to effect the improvement of the earth was seen as beyond the immediate field of action of the legislator, therefore, his actions should nevertheless be informed by an understanding of the nature of subsistence in modern societies.

We might say, then, to return to our modern terminology and disciplinary boundaries, that in Smith’s work we see no strict separation of economic and ecological concerns. In fact, on the contrary, the set of concerns covered by modern economics and ecology were closely interwoven. Nor does the “ecological” component of Smith’s thought extend only to a discrete set of concerns, such as those already highlighted around soil fertility and land use, for example. As I have tried to show in this thesis, the set of concerns relating to the materiality of subsistence made visible in what I termed Smith’s earth register is entirely continuous with the other registers of property and territory in which land is understood. To a large extent, I have suggested, this is because property and territory are not taken as fixed institutions that can therefore be placed prior to the analysis. Rather these themselves are seen in terms of an evolving and contingent set of practices, and, crucially, ones that are themselves seen to emerge as a mediation of the materiality of subsistence.

Jonsson suggests that *The Wealth of Nations* marked “a major attempt to legislate the range of natural phenomena that counted as proper objects of economic analysis” (Jonsson 2010, 1351). But I suggest this is a misleading characterization. Jonsson himself notes the expansiveness of Smith’s engagement with the phenomena of the natural world. Had Smith’s successors challenged his ideas on the same analytical ground, economic theory might have taken a quite different path. I argue that it is rather in Ricardo’s work that we see an attempt to separate out a much more strictly delineated – and much narrower – field of “economic” analysis. This is one in which ecological concerns no longer feature as part of its theoretical foundations. But it is simultaneously one that takes Smith’s own conclusions regarding the ecologically beneficent action of markets as a given. Indeed, if we read subsequent economic thought – as I have suggested – as following Ricardo more than Smith, then it is possible to say that these conclusions have been baked into economic analysis ever since.

## Materialism and materiality

In making these arguments, here and throughout the thesis, I have placed a lot of weight on the notion of materiality. This, I hope to have demonstrated, is justified by the extent to which it is able to reveal aspects of the texts with which I have been concerned that a more conventional theoretical exegesis might miss. But, as a way both of highlighting the specificity of my approach, and of putting my findings in perspective, it is useful here to compare what I have said to two arguments relating to materialism that touch on the history of economic thought, and which have also been influential for significant strands of ecological thought in recent years.

A number of economic historians have discussed the writings of the “classical” economists (the label here being used to refer to both Smith and Ricardo) in relation to the changing energetic basis of societies associated with the industrial revolution. Principal amongst these is Tony Wrigley (1962, 1972, 1987, 1988, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2016).<sup>183</sup> Wrigley noted that Smith is sometimes invoked as a herald of the Industrial Revolution (e.g. Musson 1978, 73; Strange 2015 [1988], 21), pointing away from the stifling mercantilist restrictions of the past, and towards the rapid development of industry. But, against this reading, one of Wrigley’s central arguments is that Smith should in fact be seen as describing the functioning of a pre-industrial form of production.

In his pioneering 1962 article, Wrigley suggested that Smith’s theoretical system more or less accurately reflected the workings of an economy based primarily on the use of organic materials, both as fuel and as materials of production. He was subsequently to develop this into the idea of a pre-industrial “organic economy” (e.g. 2016). In this system, all forms of production were based on the material produce of the land. The limits of the organic economy were therefore prescribed by the annual yield of photosynthetic energy that could be drawn from the land. According to this argument, an inorganic or mineral-based economy, by contrast, such as emerged in the industrial revolution, is one in which the principal source of the energy required for production has shifted to mined resources. As Rolf Sieferle emphasized, coal, the principal fuel of the industrial

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<sup>183</sup> For those influenced by Wrigley’s work, see also Rolf Sieferle (2001 [1982]) and Paolo Malanima (2009).

revolution in the nineteenth century, can be understood as a store of previously-accumulated energy: by using it, societies were able to tap into the “geological past of photosynthesis” (2001 [1982], 119). In accessing this store of past photosynthesis, this theory suggests, the industrial revolution liberated production from the age-old energetic confinements of the organic economy. With the rise of coal, in other words, land area no longer provided the absolute limit to production that it had in all previous human history.

For Wrigley, Smith’s arguments for the primacy of agriculture and his emphasis on the improvement of land thus represent a valid response to the limited energetic foundations of the pre-industrial organic economy. But, in this respect, Wrigley reads Ricardo’s work in continuity with that of Smith. With his emphasis on the extension of production into marginal lands and diminishing returns in agriculture, Ricardo is seen, in fact, as providing *the* classic account of an economics of land scarcity (Wrigley 2016, ch.2). For Wrigley, a recognition of the key importance of coal was only registered theoretically later in the nineteenth century, in Jevon’s investigation of *The Coal Question* (Jevons 1906 [1865]).<sup>184</sup>

How then, does this relate to what has been said in the present thesis? Wrigley’s account might be seen as posing a challenge to the argument put forward here on two levels. Firstly, methodologically, its approach suggests that the relevance of materiality to economic theory is solely in the manner that material conditions provide the reality that must be rendered comprehensible by this theory, and the standard against which it can be judged. Thus, Wrigley’s argument regarding Smith and Ricardo rests on a prior theorization of organic and inorganic economies, which acts as the basis for his assessment of their work. Secondly, and as a result of its methodological approach, Wrigley’s account yields a different view of the relationship between the work of Smith and Ricardo, one which sees them both as describing essentially the same problem, which is one of land’s scarcity.

Wrigley’s account is undoubtedly extremely valuable in helping to understand crucial changes in the way the earth’s resources were used in industrial societies as compared to pre-industrial ones.

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<sup>184</sup> This is a claim that has been questioned more recently by Jonsson (2019), who suggests that Jevons’ work is in fact a continuation of debates over resource scarcity starting much earlier in the nineteenth century.

My approach does not seek to contradict this. Rather my claims and Wrigley's operate on very different levels. In insisting on the causal priority of a sphere of material reality, Wrigley's approach implicitly posits a dichotomy between "the material" and "the ideal" in which the latter only ever reflects changes in the former. I have looked instead at how land's materiality is (or indeed is not) comprehended within the theoretical construction of the writings of Smith and Ricardo. Indeed, the broader argument framing this thesis, which concerns a tension between economy and ecology, goes further in suggesting that it is at least possible that our theoretical apprehension of the world through the lens of economic theory might itself have very material consequences in the form of ecological degradation. That is to say, I have started from the position that such theory may not only *describe* a pre-existing world, but it may in turn produce material effects *on* that world.

However, there is at least one tentative connection that can be made between Wrigley's arguments and my own. In his 1962 article, Wrigley in fact suggested a slightly different assessment of the relation of Smith and Ricardo. Here, he noted the centrality of land in Smith's work, but he contrasted this to comments made by the great champion and popularizer of Ricardo's work in the nineteenth century, John Ramsay McCulloch. Indeed, the comments that Wrigley focusses on are essentially the same as those that Ricardo himself had made, and which have been encountered here in Chapter Seven. These were those in which Ricardo challenged Smith's ascription of the powers of nature solely to the action of the soil, asking instead if the "elasticity of steam" was not also one of the "gifts of nature" (PPET, 76n). In this article, Wrigley suggests that these comments demonstrated the distance between the material world encountered by McCulloch, which made the importance of coal so obvious, and that described by Smith. Wrigley subsequently moved away from this argument towards emphasizing how the theories of Smith and Ricardo were similarly rooted in a description of the "organic economy" (2016, ch.2). My work, whilst clearly not attempting to answer the same set of questions as Wrigley's, would seem to support his earlier interpretation. As I have demonstrated, the theoretical centrality of land in Ricardo's work is greatly diminished, and, in particular, the detailed attention to the materiality of human subsistence from the earth has vanished.

Wrigley's work continues to inspire attempts to understand the contemporary environmental crisis (e.g. Malm 2016). However, the other major strand of materialist argument that has influenced



ecological work is that originating in the “historical materialism” of Marx. Crucial here is the work of John Bellamy Foster, who has pioneered a recovery of the ecological aspect of Marx’s thought (Foster 2000, see also 2007; Foster and Burkett 2016). This has revealed the important influence on Marx of contemporary ecological debates, and particularly the work of the agricultural and biological chemist Justus von Liebig, who Foster suggests was an important influence. Central here is Marx’s concept of social metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*), which Foster describes as “the complex, interdependent process linking human beings to nature through labor” (Foster 2000, 159). Foster explicitly links this idea to modern systems theory ecology and theories of industrial metabolism (*ibid.*, 161-2), a conclusion supported by Marina Fischer-Kowalski, who finds in Marx’s and Engels’ work on metabolism a key forerunner of the modern technique of materials flow analysis (Fischer-Kowalski 1998, 64).

Foster points out that, although Marx is often read as following Ricardo on rent theory, he was in fact a sharp critic of the failure of Ricardo’s theory to conceive of the cultivation of the earth in historical terms (Foster 2000, 144). This is a critique, of course, echoed by this thesis. Foster suggests that Marx was instead strongly influenced by the comments on rent made by the Scottish agriculturalist and political economist James Anderson.<sup>185</sup> But Foster does not go as far as to acknowledge similarities between Marx’s arguments and Smith’s. Rather, he repeats the common tendency – particularly in Marxist literature – to read Smith and Ricardo as essentially the same. The following comment, for example, is typical:

Unlike Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Marx does not base the reduction of value to labour time on a normative and/or empirical presumption that labour is more important or primary than nature as a production input. (Foster and Burkett 2016, 215)

Indeed, elsewhere, Foster explicitly suggests that land – for both Ricardo *and* Smith – is simply a “factor of production” (2007, 256). I hope to have demonstrated that this is far from accurate as a depiction of theoretical content of *The Wealth of Nations*.

Of course, Foster’s focus is on Marx, and as such the handful of comments he makes about Smith are not particularly significant in themselves. Comments such as these, I have suggested, are

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<sup>185</sup> Anderson was certainly familiar with Smith’s work, and indeed provided a detailed critique of some of Smith’s opinions – particularly regarding the effects of the Corn Laws – that Smith deemed important enough to warrant a written response, although this seems never to have appeared before Smith’s death (Hollander 1896).

indicative of a broader attitude towards Smith, not only in the Marxist tradition, but more generally, which pigeonholes him as the founder of modern liberal economics, and in which the “economic” content of his work is read through a thoroughly Ricardian lens. Indeed, Foster’s work on Marx is highly illuminating, and, as was acknowledged in the introduction of Chapter Four, this has provided an inspiration in the present study for my use of the term “material exchange” to describe the way Smith conceives of relations of subsistence. But, Foster’s work has been highly influential on the recent development of an eco-Marxist literature, which has in itself become established as an important paradigm within contemporary ecological debates (see, for example, Hornborg 2017). Comments such as these, therefore, contribute to a persistent trend in recent critical ecological literatures to read Marx as the only thinker in the canon of political economy who paid detailed attention to the ecological aspect of human subsistence.

What, then, can be said of the relation of the concern for materiality I have identified in Smith’s work, and Marx’s historical materialism? In this thesis, I have deliberately steered clear of the question of Smith’s materialism. This is for the primary reason that it does not seem helpful to the questions I have tried to address which are specifically around land’s materiality, rather than materialism, which is a philosophical tradition with a long and complex history of its own (Brown and Ladyman 2019).<sup>186</sup> Foster’s discussion of materialism is useful, demonstrating that Marx considered his own materialism as belonging to the “process of natural history” (Foster 2000, 7). Clearly the reference to natural history suggests strong resonances with how Smith conceived of his own approach. However, to explore these connections in more detail would require significant further work.

What can be said here is that what I have identified as Smith’s concern for materiality shows significant overlap with elements Marx’s thought. Clearly Smith offers nothing like the specific concept of “metabolism” that Foster reads as a cornerstone of Marx’s thought. Smith’s was the conceptual language of the later eighteenth century, and not that of the formative period of ecology as a discipline, which was the context in which Marx wrote. However, I have tried to show that,

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<sup>186</sup> In the first section of Chapter Three, it was also suggested that the question of materialism in relation to Smith is one particularly associated with the historical debate on the “Adam Smith problem”. At stake in this debate, however, is the primacy of Smith’s moral reasoning, something that, for the present purposes, I have not found it necessary to discuss in great detail.

by looking in detail at the way Smith conceptualizes land, we can see that his work is also, similarly to Marx's, premised on an understanding of the material exchanges that constitute societal subsistence. Furthermore, like Marx, Smith's approach places an acknowledgement of the historicity of the relationships that constitute these material exchanges – both amongst humans and between humans and the earth itself – at the centre of its analysis. Again, to draw out these connections more fully is a project for further work. But, by way of conclusion here, it is possible to suggest that such connections seem significant. This is perhaps less in an intellectual historical sense, than as a counterpoint to the tendency of recent green commentary to treat Marx as the only “ecological” thinker in the canon of political economy. It can surely only help contemporary debates to identify more precisely the heritage of the ecological assumptions ingrained in the development of modern economics.

## **Final thoughts**

Land is something so essential to our existence, such an omnipresent background to thinking about diverse aspects of human life, that, as a concept, it can easily come to appear as obvious, requiring little further examination. I hope that this thesis has been successful in arguing that the concept of land is not as self-evident as it may sometimes seem. The primary aim has been to uncover the origins of a particular way of thinking about land, that which I have suggested has informed the development of modern economics. But in the process, and especially through a detailed examination of Adam Smith's thought around land, the thesis has hopefully revealed something of the complexity and contingency of land as a concept more generally, exploring the way that this concept hinges on its relation to a diverse array of social practices. The practices visible in Smith's work are, to borrow Foucault's words, a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble” (1980, 194), comprising – to mention only a few – contract law, farming, state surveying, boundary-marking, and taxation. Certainly, Smith's work does not exhaust the possibilities of thinking about land, but it does seem to draw together an unusually rich set of insights into land in its sociological aspect.

There is no necessary reason, perhaps, why today's economics should recognize land in exactly the

way that it has been discussed here. However, the present moment, particularly in light of the existential threat to human societies posed by overlapping ecological crises, does invite reflection on the place of land within economics, and, indeed, on the nature of economic thought itself. Clearly, there is little point today advocating a return to Smith's eighteenth century political economy. This is not least because, as Wrigley's work makes clear, the material basis of subsistence in industrialized societies is crucially different to that in pre-industrial societies. Smith's project of a "scientific" account of human institutions also rests on a number of assumptions about the nature and history of human life on earth that we would today certainly reject. Yet, in light of the contemporary ecological crisis, the project of reconciling the study of economics with other sciences, and particularly geological and biological sciences, must be urgently embraced. A key step in this project, I suggest, must be to (re)connect the study of economy to an understanding of the materiality of economic processes. With this as the over-arching orientation, it is possible to point to a number of paths along which the present research might be developed in the future.

Although the specific conclusions drawn here about the development of an economic concept of land stand as a self-contained argument, this work simultaneously provides the foundations for a fuller genealogy of land in economic thought, one which takes into account both developments before Smith, and after Ricardo, as well as in the work of their contemporaries. Many of the thinkers mentioned here might warrant further study, but two avenues of investigation seem to suggest themselves particularly strongly based on the findings established so far. The first is to look in greater detail at the physiocrats, who were identified as important influences on Smith. The second is to look further at the work of Marx who, as I have suggested in this concluding chapter, might be more indebted to Smith than is commonly acknowledged.

In deepening this genealogical aspect of the investigation, further connections could also be explored to Foucault's own more substantive work on economic thought, both by looking in greater detail at his own discussions of political economy, and by drawing links to recent efforts to broaden his notion of biopolitics beyond the sphere of the human to encompass a politics of life in general (e.g. Barney and Montag 2018). Indeed, whilst I have found Foucault indispensable in providing a philosophical grounding for the kind of detailed conceptual work I have undertaken, the relationship of my findings to his own substantive arguments is less clear. For example, the

argument explored in Chapter Two from his *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]) turns around the idea that the figure of “man” as an object of science is a specifically nineteenth-century development. My investigation suggests that, more properly, the idea of a science of man should be thought of as one associated with the Scottish Enlightenment. In fact, I have suggested that it is in part the very disappearance of an understanding of political economic thought as part of a science of man that constituted the radical departure of Ricardo’s work from Smith’s. However, given the scope of my investigation, it is not possible to draw any firmer conclusions on this. What this investigation does tentatively support, instead, is the idea emphasized in Foucault’s later work of a shift towards viewing population as the object of governance, not as a body of individuals, but as a collective entity. In Ricardo’s work, this is seen in particular through the shedding of the jurisprudential aspect of Smith’s framework. The timing, coinciding with the taking of the first census and other attempts by the British state at a better quantitative apprehension of its territory and resources, suggests possible links, though further work would be required to draw any stronger conclusions on this point.

Thus, a fuller genealogical investigation, I suggest, has the potential to add significantly to our understandings of the derivation of today’s economic ideas. Nevertheless, although this kind of historical work is essential, the project of reconstituting the field of economic thought in light of contemporary ecological crises necessarily requires that a deconstructive phase be accompanied by a reconstructive one. The view that I have presented of Adam Smith’s work gives us a glimpse of an alternative ordering of knowledge, prior to the crystallization of modern disciplinary boundaries. What must be sought today, it seems, is a similar disciplinary reconfiguration. I have already here suggested that paying attention to the materiality of economic processes provides potential ways forward. On the basis of the work undertaken here, more explicit contributions to meta-theoretical debates could be made. In particular, through the theoretical framework laid out here, I have tried to follow an approach that seeks to overcome the persistent divide in thought between the material and the ideal. Further work could be done to explore the possible applications of such a framework in helping to bridge gaps between the diverse approaches that constitute recent efforts to rethink the nature of economic thought (e.g. Brown and Timmerman 2015; Farley and Malghan 2016; Spash 2017; Jakobsen 2018; Katz-Rosene and Paterson 2018; Barrière 2019).

It was said at the start of the thesis that this investigation took as its starting point a recognition of the contemporary tension between the logics of economy and ecology. In doing so, it might be argued that I have risked to marginalize a crucial third set of concerns which have been at least implicit to a greater or lesser extent throughout the discussion, those belonging to the domain of politics. But this is not my interpretation. The reading I have put forward of land in Adam Smith's work suggests that those concerns that we consider today as economic and ecological, are always-already *political*. That is to say, for Smith, the whole political organization of societies is, in essence, the constitution of a collective relationship to the earth. This is a powerful message, and one that should certainly resonate with the urgent concerns of today. Remembering the Greek origins of "economy" in the management of the household, it can be said that in today's increasingly interdependent world, this household is surely a global one, and an economics for the present must surely take this into account. However, as Bruno Latour (Latour 2018) has recently argued, in the present age – when the politics of globalism is associated with a desire for an ever-expanding progress tailored to suit only a small minority – we might be better to orient ourselves away from the notion of the global, and towards that of the *terrestrial*. Perhaps, then, in seeking an economics fit for the present day, what we should be striving towards is a political economy of the earth.

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