

The Context of Economic Development

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Introduction

IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS or so there has been a spate of studies on Irish economic development over the longer term (notably Crotty, 1986; Kennedy *et al.*, 1988; Lee, 1989; Girvin, 1989; O'Malley, 1989; Breen *et al.*, 1990)—to mention only those that cover the broad canvas.¹ The studies have involved a wide range of disciplinary perspectives—economic, historical, political and sociological. In this paper I shall not attempt a balanced survey, let alone a synthesis, of these studies and other relevant work. Instead I will draw selectively on them to try to give a picture of the more important things we know, and do not know, about economic development in Ireland since independence.

The first section outlines the aggregate economic growth record since independence in a comparative European perspective. The thorny issue of performance in relation to potential is then considered, in the course of which some of the major structural changes in the Irish economy are documented. Explanations of the Irish performance are next discussed. We then turn to the question of how well or how badly Ireland is placed as a result of its past development to face future prospects in an ever more integrated Europe. The final section points to major gaps in our knowledge where further research and reflection are needed.

The Economic Growth Record Since Independence

Table 1 shows the growth rates of total real product, population and product per capita in the Republic for various periods from the mid-1920s

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¹ Reference should also be made to the studies of Johnson (1985) and L. Kennedy (1988) in the pamphlet series of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland. Significant recent works on the development of the Northern Ireland economy include L. Kennedy and Ollerenshaw (1985) and Harris *et al.* (1990).

Table 1. Average annual growth rates (%) of total and per capita real product in Ireland and the United Kingdom, 1926-1985.

	Total real product				Population				Real product per capita			
	Republic	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom		Republic	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom		Republic	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom	
1926-38 ^a	1.3	0.7	2.4		-0.1	0.2	0.4		1.4	0.6	2.0	
1938-50	1.1	4.0	1.4		0.1	0.5	0.4		1.0	3.5	0.9	
1950-60	1.7	2.6	2.5		-0.5	0.4	0.4		2.2	2.2	2.1	
1960-73	4.4	3.7	3.1		0.6	0.6	0.5		3.8	3.1	2.6	
1973-85	1.7	1.1	1.2		1.2	0.1	0.1		0.5	1.0	1.1	
1926-85 ^a	2.1	2.4	2.1		0.3	0.4	0.4		1.8	2.0	1.7	

^a For Northern Ireland, the starting year is 1924.

Source: Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh (1988: Table 6.1)

to the mid-1980s, with corresponding figures for Northern Ireland and the UK. The most striking feature of the table is how close the figures are for the three areas over the period as a whole—and particularly for the Republic and the UK—despite differences in sub-periods. In view of the close ties between the Republic and the UK, the similarity in their long-term growth rates is hardly coincidental and I shall return to the point later.

How satisfactory is it merely to have kept pace with Britain? Obviously it means that there has been little in the way of catching-up or convergence, so that Ireland's living standards remain well below the UK. This in itself, though disappointing, would not matter so much perhaps if the UK had been a star performer in this period. But, in fact, as Table 2 shows, the UK had the worst record in Europe over the period in terms of the growth both of output and output per capita—a conclusion that is generally

Table 2. Comparative long-term growth rates and levels of total product per capita in Western Europe.

European countries (ranked in descending order of product per capita in 1913 in col. 3)	Average Annual Growth Rates (%) 1913–87		Level of Real Product Per Capita relative to UK (UK = 100)	
	(1) Real Product	(2) Real Product per Capita	(3) 1913	(4) 1987
1. United Kingdom	1.9	1.5	100	100
2. Switzerland	2.9	2.1	81	130
3. Belgium	2.1	1.8	78	96
4. Netherlands	3.0	1.8	78	100
5. Denmark	2.8	2.0	73	108
6. Austria	2.2	2.0	65	96
7. France	2.6	2.2	63	103
8. West Germany	2.8	2.3	62	109
9. Sweden	2.9	2.4	58	113
10. Italy	2.9	2.2	58	98
11. Ireland	1.9	1.7	53	60
12. Norway	3.5	2.7	51	127
13. Spain	2.8	1.9	51	71
14. Finland	3.4	2.7	42	104
15. Portugal	3.1	2.4	27	51
16. Greece	3.3	2.4	26	51
Mean	2.7	2.1	61	95

Source: Derived from Maddison (1989) and OECD *National Accounts 1960–1989: Main Aggregates, Vol. 1*. The product per capita levels relate to GDP per head using purchasing power parities based on 1980 relative prices.

regarded as robust even with due allowance for the fragility of estimates of long-term economic growth. Just prior to the First World War, Ireland's income per capita at between one-half and three-fifths of the UK level—then the highest in Europe—stood at quite a respectable relative level, close to the mean of the other countries of western Europe. Today, still standing at about three-fifths of the British level, Ireland has one of the lowest living standards in western Europe, with less than two-thirds of the mean level and only Portugal and Greece below it.

Reverting to Table 1 for a moment, it will be noted that Ireland's record did improve considerably in the 1960s when its growth rate substantially outpaced that of the UK and came into line with the average for continental Western Europe. Even in this period, however, as may be seen from Table 3, the Irish growth rate was still well below that of the other low income countries of Europe, which were then experiencing a strong convergence towards the levels of the richer countries. Moreover, the improvement in Ireland's record was not soundly maintained subsequently after the first oil crisis in 1973.²

Table 3. Growth rate of real GDP in poorer Western European countries 1960–1973 (% p.a.).

Ireland	Finland	Italy	Portugal	Spain	Greece
4.4	5.0	5.3	6.9	7.3	7.7

Source: OECD *Historical Statistics*.

An alternative basis of comparison is to look at the growth record in the seventy years since independence in relation to the seventy years previously. Briefly, the picture is that, while the growth of output was undoubtedly higher after independence and population decline was eventually arrested, the growth of per capita income, surprisingly, was probably not significantly higher. In the public mind, however, the most demoralising feature of Ireland's economic experience after independence was the failure for so long to arrest population decline which continued up to 1961, involving net emigration in that period of over one million persons. Indeed if one wished to stick rigidly to Kuznets's definition of economic growth as involving a sustained rise both in population and in product per capita (Kuznets, 1965: 6), Ireland experienced economic growth only for a small proportion of the last one hundred and fifty years. Moreover,

² Since 1973, GDP is not a good measure of Ireland's performance since its growth depended so heavily on government spending and inward foreign investment. These gave rise to offsetting outflows of interest on foreign debt and profit repatriations, which substantially reduced GNP relative to GDP.

notwithstanding the substantial population exodus, Ireland failed to provide enough jobs for those who remained: the unemployment rate has been high throughout and never fell below about 5 per cent even when rates of 2 per cent or less were commonplace in the rest of Europe.

Ireland's unfavourable demographic and labour force experience makes it unique, and I shall return later to the cause and effect relationship with economic development. Here I would only like to add that this experience, in a purely accounting sense, 'explains' a not insignificant part of the gap in the level and growth of income per capita *vis-à-vis* other European countries. In 1986, only 30.5 per cent of the Irish population were employed, a figure well below the EC average of 38.7 per cent. The low figure for Ireland is not simply due to the much higher unemployment rate in Ireland—though that indeed is the major factor. It arises also because of the higher proportion of the population in the dependent age groups, and the lower than average participation rate. These variables interact in complex ways with each other and with other demographic or labour force variables—such as Ireland's birth rate which only began to fall in the 1980s, or the selective character of Irish emigration which has always been heavily concentrated in the young active age groups.

Compared, for instance, to Finland in 1986, Ireland's income per capita amounted only to 59 per cent, but had Ireland had the same proportion of the population at work (50 per cent in Finland), the difference in income per capita would be almost entirely eliminated. Or to put the matter another way, the productivity of those at work in Ireland in 1986 was nearly as high as in Finland: the difference in living standards was due, arithmetically, to the fact that so few were at work in Ireland.³ Likewise, over time, the growth of GDP per worker in Ireland relative to other countries has been better than the growth of GDP per capita. This is because the proportion of the population actually employed fell by 26 per cent between 1926 and 1986 (from 41.4 per cent to 30.5 per cent)—a much bigger decline than in other European countries, in some of which (notably the Scandinavian countries) the proportion rose.

Performance in Relation to Potential

The Irish growth record since independence can be described, at best, as mediocre. But the question immediately arises as to whether this poor

³ This statement is designed only to illustrate the order of magnitude of Ireland's exceptionally low employment/population ratio, and not to assert causality. Clearly if Ireland had had the same proportion of the population in employment as Finland, the Irish productivity level would not have been the same unless other things also had changed (e.g. the capital stock).

record might not be due to Ireland having a smaller potential for growth than other countries—due for example to disadvantages that applied uniquely to Ireland. It is not inconceivable that Ireland performed as well in relation to potential as other European countries, and that its mediocre record arose simply from its poor potential.

In the present state of knowledge, there is no precise way to determine a country's potential for long-term growth. The prevailing measures of potential output used by economists relate essentially to the short run. They take as given existing structures, institutions, attitudes etc. whereas the process of long-run development involves major changes in such variables. An even more fundamental difficulty in specifying a country's potential arises from the importance of the human dimension—both as a direct input and as embodied in institutions and culture. This factor is evident from the rapid progress made by some countries in the face of considerable material and locational disadvantages. Indeed, virtually all countries which have developed rapidly have demonstrated an ability to overcome constraints and disadvantages through human ingenuity. A feature of the human dimension that does not apply to the other factors of production is that, because it can react consciously to its environment, its contribution may sometimes be stimulated and enhanced by the very existence of difficulties. Thus, it is possible to point to examples where difficulties were instrumental in evoking human ingenuity that might otherwise have lain dormant—a truth enshrined in the motto 'necessity is the mother of invention'. But one can also point readily to cases where necessity proved to be crushing when the human response was inadequate, and we are very far from understanding which forces and conditions are most likely to stimulate a creative human response either at the individual or at the social level.

Perhaps what can usefully be done is to try to assess the significance of some major constraints applying in the Irish situation, leaving open for the moment whether these were greater or less than those that applied to other countries.

The UK connection

At independence over 90 per cent of Irish exports went to the UK (Table 4). In addition the financial, labour market, institutional and other links were extremely close. This is not surprising given that Ireland was for so long a region of the UK. Nor would it necessarily have been a disadvantage if the UK had been a dynamic economy. But there is strong, if not decisive, theoretical and empirical support for the view that peripheral low income areas find it difficult to catch up when the core is stagnant or growing slowly.

Table 4. Composition of Irish merchandise exports (%).

	1929	1950	1988
Destination			
UK	92	88	35
Other EC	3	7	39
US	2	2	9
Other	3	3	17
Total	100	100	100
Commodity			
Food and drink	86	80	26
Manufactures	} 14	7	66
Other		13	8
Total	100	100	100
Ratio Exports: GNP (factor cost)	29	20	66

Source: *Statistical Abstract of Ireland*.

In this regard the contrasting experience of the poorer member states of the EC (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland) before and after 1973 is striking (Table 5). Prior to 1973, when the whole western world experienced rapid growth, there was strong convergence in all except for Ireland. Even Ireland is not an outright exception since during 1960–73 its living standards were converging rapidly in relation to the UK, the market on which it was still largely dependent. From 1973 to the mid-1980s convergence ceased with the general slow-down in growth.⁴ There are plausible reasons for attributing the causation to growth. When growth generally is buoyant and the strong centres are pressing on the limits of capacity, forces enter in which enable the periphery to outpace the core. The core areas begin to experience labour and skill shortages, congestion intensifies, house prices soar—thereby enhancing the attractions of the periphery as a location for new investment. On the other hand, when there is slack everywhere the centralising tendencies in economic activity tend to dominate.⁵

⁴ The suggestion in Table 5 of a slight convergence for Ireland from 1973 to 1987 is more apparent than real, due to the limitations of the GDP measure in this period pointed out in n. 2, above.

⁵ Eoin O'Malley had drawn my attention to another argument derived from traditional trade theory pointing in the same direction, namely, that the law of comparative advantage presupposes full employment and that when such conditions apply at the centre the less developed areas are likely to enjoy greater scope to exploit their comparative advantage.

Table 5. Relative GDP per capita in poorer EC countries 1960, 1973 and 1987 (Euro 12 = 100).

	1960	1973	1987
Greece	39	57	54
Ireland	62	60	63
Portugal	38	55	54
Spain	59	77	74
Four poorest combined	52	70	67
Ratio 4 poorest: 4 richest	42	63	60

Source: EC Commission *Annual Economic Report 1988-89*, Statistical Annex, Table A.4.

No other European country was as dependent on one market as Ireland was on the UK. No matter how hard Ireland tried, it was going to take time to reduce this dependence. The 1930s and 1940s were not auspicious times for diversifying the destination of trade, even if Irish policy had been directed more effectively towards that goal. Indeed as late as 1950 the degree of trade dependence on the UK was virtually unaltered. The postwar period was much more favourable to diversifying the destination and commodity composition of Irish trade, and it is surely no accident that Ireland began to outpace Britain as that process intensified. Yet the fact that even by 1960 Ireland still sent 75 per cent of its exports to the UK goes at least some way towards accounting for the fact, shown in Table 3, that Ireland grew more slowly from 1960 to 1973 than the other low-income countries of Europe. During this period the volume of imports of goods and services rose annually by 5 per cent in the UK compared with 8.5 for OECD Europe, so that it is not surprising that Ireland, with its heavy UK dependence, had a much lower export growth than any of the other countries in Table 3 (except Finland).

Inherited economic structure

The partition of Ireland, with Northern Ireland remaining in the UK, deprived the new state of the only region with substantial industrial development. Independent Ireland was heavily reliant on agriculture in relation both to trade (Table 4) and employment (Table 6), with only a minuscule manufacturing sector.

One must be careful here to avoid special pleading, since the high share of agriculture in the 1920s was not dissimilar to what prevailed in many European countries 50 years earlier (see Maddison, 1982: Table C5). It might therefore be said to portray simply Ireland's latecomer status rather

Table 6. Structure of employment in Ireland 1926 and 1986.

	1926		1986	
	No. (000)	Share (%)	No. (000)	Share (%)
Agriculture	653	54	168	16
Industry	162	13	307	28
Manufacturing	(120)	(10)	(211)	(20)
Services	406	33	606	56
Total	1,220	100	1,081	100

Source: Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh (1988: Table 7.2).

than a constraint on future development. Nevertheless, even without necessarily accepting O'Malley's (1989) thesis about the difficulties of late industrialisation, it can be argued that the structure of activity which Ireland inherited at independence was not conducive to rapid development in the prevailing conditions. The real agricultural price declined drastically from 1919 to the mid-1930s, and thereafter the long-term trend was downwards. The widespread resort to agricultural protectionism in the 1930s restricted market access almost exclusively to the UK, where the indigenous farmers were subsidised in a way that kept prices low. Ireland made matters worse for its own agriculture in the 1930s on the UK market—both in terms of price and market access—as a result of the Economic War. But even without that, conditions were never for long conducive to a strong agricultural performance until Ireland joined the European Community; and even then the prosperous conditions were short-lived. Furthermore, on the supply side, the inherited structure of land tenure—resulting from the settlement of the land question in favour of small scale owner occupation—was ill-adapted to a dynamic expansion of agriculture.

The absence of any widespread manufacturing tradition may be seen from the fact that two-thirds of the tiny manufacturing sector in the 1920s comprised processing of food and drink. Maddison's figures, referred to earlier, show that even fifty years earlier, few of the sixteen developed countries in his sample had quite so small an industrial base, while the figures in Flora (1987) for about the 1920s suggest that, apart from Finland, Ireland was the least developed industrially among thirteen west European countries in terms of the share of the labour force in that sector. Inevitably, it would take time to build this base, and in the prevailing conditions—the widespread protectionism of the 1930s and the absence of a strong flow of mobile, export-oriented foreign enterprise—it would have been very difficult then to build an export-oriented industry even if Ireland had tried to do so.

Cultural legacy

A number of writers have drawn attention to the inhibitions on Irish economic development at independence resulting from attitudes, institutions etc. inherited from the country's turbulent past. Meenan (1970) has argued cogently that the conceptions about the economy engendered during the nationalist struggle, and which were potent in mobilising support for that struggle, were ill-adapted to the task of economic regeneration. The major preconceptions which, he claims, were widely held and took long to unlearn were fourfold: that Irish economic development had been retarded by British misgovernment; that economic development depended on the policies followed by the state; that self-government would quickly bring prosperity; and that the future of the economy would be determined by what happens in Ireland.

Likewise, a central thesis of Lee (1989) is that the insecurity of nineteenth century life in Ireland engendered—quite rationally in the conditions of the time—a 'possession' mentality which carried over into the twentieth century and stifled the emergence of a 'performance' ethic so vital for progress in the economy as well as in other areas. In regard to Olson's (1982) thesis about the inhibiting effect of established interest groups, it may be noted that the character of the Irish revolution was such that it did not involve any shake-up of such interests. Crotty's (1986) theory about the problems of former capitalist colonies can also be included in the catalogue of arguments suggesting that Ireland's development potential was constrained by its prior history. Finally the incomplete settlement of the national question at independence had lasting repercussions. Fanning (1990) has argued that 'the Treaty split and the civil war ensured that, after the Union as under the Union, the dynamic of Irish politics drew its energy from the conflict of opinion about the legitimacy of the British connection' so that 'the struggle for political power hinged on the shape and form of Irish independence, not on the economic policies best suited to a newly independent state'. Later, since the end of the 1960s, the Northern Ireland conflict has absorbed much government time as well as involving substantial security and other costs.

Assessment

Whether the foregoing constraints were greater or less than those facing other European countries is not a question that can be precisely answered, at least not in the present state of knowledge. For one thing, there simply has not been enough quantitative comparative work on the subject. It must also be taken into account that Ireland at independence had many

advantages not possessed in the same degree by some of the countries that have since outpaced it. Ireland then could no longer be said to be overpopulated, having a relatively low population density; it had no national debt and substantial external capital reserves; there was an extensive rail network; the banking system was widely spread; communications were satisfactory by contemporary standards; and education levels were not inferior to those generally prevailing.

Furthermore, the constraints mentioned above have more force in accounting for Ireland's slow initial progress rather than for the sustained mediocrity of its record. While they might reasonably indicate a low potential in the first thirty years of independence, they are less cogent in explaining why Ireland had not prepared itself better to take early advantage of the great postwar recovery of Europe—so that even in the 1960s it did not catch up as rapidly as the other less developed states of Europe—or why in the late 1970s it created such enormous problems for itself in the 1980s.

The studies mentioned at the start take the view that Ireland's poor record was not chiefly a reflection of a low potential but derived from Ireland's poor performance. By this I take them to mean either that Ireland was not noticeably disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* other European countries *or*, to the extent that it was, these disadvantages were capable of being overcome by feasible policies and actions (not always specified!). While the verdict is unanimous, and is shared by this author, it may not be beyond reasonable doubt: certainly it should be interpreted as an informed opinion rather than an established fact.

There is another possible defence against the charge of poor performance, namely that Ireland simply did not place as high a value on economic development as other countries did. A nation may be conceived of as pursuing many objectives with different degrees of intensity and the fact that it scores poorly on one objective might reflect the low priority attached to the achievement of that objective. It is probable that every country falls short of realising its full economic potential because other goals temper, in varying degree, the urgency with which development is pursued. If the Irish preferred large families to higher per capita income, or chose a quiet life in favour of the disruptions accompanying rapid economic growth, then who is to say they have performed badly? The Irish, so this argument would run, failed to hit the target of economic development, not because they were bad shots but because they were aiming at a different target.

The only author to address this issue (Lee, 1989) dismisses it scornfully in less than a page, arguing that the Irish were not lacking in concern for material gain, though they may have been 'inefficient materialists'. One

can sympathise with this dismissive attitude, given that the argument is liable to be invoked to excuse even the most inept performance. Nevertheless, the issue probably deserves a more extensive treatment. Ireland's large religious missionary effort absorbed the energies of many highly motivated and enterprising people. De Valera articulated a vision of Ireland, which had at least wide sentimental appeal, as 'the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit' (Moynihan, 1980). Yet, even if it were demonstrated that the Irish attached an exceptionally high priority to spiritual values to the detriment of economic development, this would still raise large questions about the nature of that spirituality. The inadequate rate of economic development imposed severe hardship on many of the weakest classes who were forced to emigrate or remain poor, unemployed and often celibate for life. Hence, even if it were true that Ireland valued economic development less than other countries in the interest of spiritual values, one would still be left to explain *why* it accorded so little priority to an objective that could affect so profoundly what many would now regard as a central spiritual value, namely, the welfare of its most vulnerable people.

Explanations

Economic development is studied not only from different perspectives but also with different objectives. Some are interested in exploring the processes manifested in the course of economic development, others in its causes, and others still in its consequences for various aspects of society which are the ultimate focus of their attention. Of course these objectives are not entirely separable. A fuller knowledge of the 'how' of economic development is indispensable for throwing light on the 'why' questions, while the consequences of economic development in any period may have feedback effects which determine the subsequent course of economic development. Even in the case of those primarily interested in the explanation of economic development, the different disciplinary perspectives they bring to bear will inevitably influence the character of the explanations they provide. Furthermore, explanations may be offered at different levels: some may concentrate on the more proximate causes, while others may wish to explore the deeper forces underlying the proximate causes.

The range of recent interpretations of Irish economic development in the studies mentioned at the start of the paper exemplify this diversity.

Before attempting to generalise about them as a body of literature, it may be helpful to the reader not familiar with them to give a brief individual outline of the approach adopted in each study, taking them in order of date of publication.

Crotty (1986) focuses on the failure of Ireland to provide a livelihood for all its people at acceptable living standards, as exemplified by the long history of emigration and unemployment. In seeking to explain this failure, he rejects detailed comparison with the other countries of Europe. Ireland is altogether unique among European countries in being the only one that was 'capitalist colonised'. Although possessing distinctive features, it is more appropriately analysed in the context of third world underdevelopment. According to Crotty, all former capitalist colonies have not only failed to develop but have 'undeveloped'. The basic reason is that capitalist colonisation imposed a social structure for the profit of the colonial power which was inimical to indigenous development. Independence has not remedied the situation, since independence was generally gained by local elites benefiting from colonisation, who worked to preserve the inherited structures and institutions so as to safeguard their privileged position. The state itself, therefore, became a major barrier to development in all such countries. Underdevelopment can only be reversed by 'countering the effects of western culture on non-western societies' (p. 111), involving a major reduction in the power of the State, and Crotty advances a set of radical proposals along those lines for Ireland.

Kennedy *et al.* (1988) explicitly take the record of economic growth in European countries as an appropriate standard against which to evaluate the Irish record of economic development in the twentieth century. The Irish record emerges as 'mediocre', and the authors argue that it cannot be fully excused by disadvantages applying particularly to Ireland. The analysis of Ireland's performance centres on conventional economic variables such as human and physical capital, foreign trade etc., but the explanation they offer, which is summarised later at the end of this section, invokes more deep-rooted strategic weaknesses.

Although Lee's (1989) book is a general history of Ireland, it concentrates heavily on Irish economic development and, indeed, more than any of the other studies, has been influential in drawing the attention of the wider public to Ireland's poor record over the longer-term. Like Kennedy *et al.* (1988), but unlike Crotty (1986), Lee views Ireland within a European framework and reaches similar, but more trenchant, conclusions on Ireland's performance. Lee's explanation is contained in a detailed historical discussion of four factors: institutions, intellect, character and identity. The discussion, though always fascinating, is rather diffuse and not easily summarised. The chief organising principle running through the

discussion is the 'possession-performance' dichotomy already referred to. Though the social processes through which the possession mentality, developed in the nineteenth century, is transmitted from generation to generation and continues to triumph over a performance ethic, are not explicitly addressed, Lee obviously attaches considerable importance to emigration in this regard. The Irish socio-economic system was one 'that decreed mass emigration and natural population decline as prerequisites for the comfort of the survivors' (p. 644). Lee also has much to say about the failure of elite groups, notably the public administration and social science practitioners, to generate and make use of the knowledge that could transform society.

Grivin's (1989) characterisation of Ireland is given by the title of his book, *Between Two Worlds*, the world of the liberal democratic industrialised states and the underdeveloped, and often undemocratic, states of the Third World. Ireland is placed between these two poles, and does not fit readily into either. In fact it is a hybrid, combining a politically sophisticated society with an underdeveloped economy. Ireland's failure to attain industrial maturity lies at the heart of many of its economic difficulties, and the book provides an in-depth account, drawing heavily on departmental files, of the changing industrial policies pursued in the first forty years or so of independence up to the mid-1960s.

O'Malley's (1989) book also focuses on the inadequate development of industry. This is examined in the context of a general theory about the problems of late industrialisation for all developing countries. The theory emphasises the major barriers to entry and expansion facing indigenous firms in such circumstances, arising from the superior competitive position of larger and longer-established rivals in advanced countries. The barriers exist 'in the wide range of industries which are characterised by factors such as economies of scale, large capital requirements, product differentiation, advanced technology, specialised skills or dependence on external economies inherent in large advanced industrial centres' (p. 259). It is claimed that these barriers would exclude indigenous firms in late industrialising countries from developing many internationally traded industries without active and selective state support in surmounting the barriers. The attraction of foreign enterprises would not suffice to fill the gap since 'they would generally have no decisive secondary effects in stimulating local industry through technology transfer or the development of skills or linkages' (p. 260). Irish industrial experience is investigated in this framework and is interpreted as conforming to it.

The work of Breen *et al.* (1990) examines the transformation of the Irish economy and society since the late 1950s and the consequences of this transformation. It takes social class as the key to explaining social

change, but since the class structure in Ireland has been profoundly affected by the State, the central focus of the book is on the impact of State policies on the Irish class structure. The study concludes that the state 'has been monumentally unsuccessful either in ensuring sustained economic growth or in moderating inegalitarian tendencies in the class system' (p. 209). How is this explained? The explanation concentrates heavily on the degree of independence enjoyed by the State in setting its goals ('autonomy') and its ability to achieve these goals ('capacity'). The autonomy of the State has become increasingly circumscribed by, above all, the kind of industrial policy pursued which required ever increasing public expenditure and left the supply of enterprise, which was chiefly foreign, dependent on the vagaries of world economic conditions. The capacity of the State was always limited and has not been enhanced despite the vast increase in the scope of State intervention and expenditure. The catch-all nature of the two main political parties led to a situation where successive governments sought to placate all sectional interests, so that distributional issues were obfuscated rather than resolved. In such circumstances politics were dominated by short-term expediency, so that systematic attempts at long-term planning proved abortive or were not even tried at all. In short, the essence of the problem for these authors is that 'the State has tended to give in rather than develop an overall strategy of development' (p. 218).

It is clear from this brief sketch of the different studies that, while there is overlap in some of the explanations, no unified common explanation emerges. Nevertheless, there are a number of generalisations that are worth making about this range of studies.

First, although some of the authors are either practising economists, or received training in economics, none has attempted to offer an explanation solely in terms of mainstream neoclassical economics. Presumably none of them was convinced that this framework was adequate, and the many Irish economists who profess faith in the application of this paradigm have not sought to confront it with Ireland's long-term development experience. I regard this as a pity since, although not personally convinced that a neoclassical analysis can provide a satisfactory explanation, I believe it could enhance our knowledge, as I shall suggest below. Moreover, such an exercise would, I believe, lead to a clearer identification of where the neoclassical framework breaks down, with the possibility of positive feedback to the development of an enriched neoclassical paradigm.

Second, and partly related to the foregoing point, most of the authors, though in varying degree, emphasise the presence of market failures which could not have been overcome by private individuals or organisations, but which they see as capable of being remedied by government, if only it

adopted the right policies.⁶ I think this underlies the strong public policy focus in most of the studies as the key to why Ireland did not do better. To overstate the point somewhat, the reader of these studies might reasonably draw the conclusion that Ireland's failure since independence ultimately lay in the fact that government and the public administration lacked either the will or the competence to find and implement the correct policies—though this mythical reader might well be perplexed by the fact that there are often wide divergences among the authors on what they would see as the correct policies! Perhaps some, if not all, of the authors, might have directed more attention to two other possible reasons for policy impotence even when there is no lack of discernment or will: first, not all market failures can be remedied even by a government with unlimited political power; and, second, the political power of government may be severely constrained by the unwillingness of the electorate to support necessary remedies. I do not say that any of the authors was unaware of these points, only that the points might often have figured more prominently. In this regard, an explicit application of the developing body of literature on the economic analysis of democratic choice might yield useful insights.

Third, although some of the studies made extensive use of quantitative data for descriptive purposes, the explanations are all qualitative in nature. None of them attempts an explicit quantification of the various explanatory factors identified. No doubt it might be premature to expect anything better at this stage, but the absence of such quantification makes it hard for others to weigh the significance of different forces either from the viewpoint of evaluating their plausibility or of drawing out a concrete policy programme (see Barry, 1988).

Fourth, the explanations can be divided broadly into those which regard Ireland as an illustration of a more general theory, and those which emphasise special features in the Irish situation. Crotty's (1986) capitalist colonisation and O'Malley's (1989) late development theses fall clearly into the former category, while the explanations offered in Kennedy *et al.* (1988), Lee (1989), Girvin (1989) and Breen *et al.* (1990) fit mainly into the second category.

Finally, it may be noted that the explanations, where different, are not necessarily in conflict since they often operate at different levels. Perhaps I might illustrate this by outlining the basis of the explanation put forward in my own study along with two other ESRI colleagues. Having detailed

⁶ Crotty is an exception in that for him the State itself is an inevitable impediment and its power must be drastically reduced if development is to take place. He fails to demonstrate convincingly, however, how this could be accomplished and by whom.

the achievements and failures of Ireland's development efforts, we then asked whether there were important common weaknesses attaching to the various efforts. We believed we could identify three such weaknesses: failure to grasp the implications of small size of country, absence of long-term perspective, and neglect of the human resource dimension.

One or more of these weaknesses seemed to be operative in all major areas of policy throughout the period and, as the poor performance of indigenous industry shows, they were just as evident in the private, as in the public, sector. To illustrate in the case of industrial development, all three weaknesses prevailed even when widely different strategies were attempted. Successful industrial expansion in a small economy calls for a high degree of selectivity, since such an economy cannot hope to produce efficiently across as wide a range of activities as a larger country. Yet the methods used in implementing both of the major industrial strategies followed since independence—the protectionist and the outward-looking—failed to grasp this imperative, at least until recently. Both of these strategies made sense in the long-term only on the basis of some variant of the infant industry argument, according to which the infants would eventually grow up and prosper without continuing state protection or subvention. Yet neither of the two strategies had any long-term vision as to how that process would come about, so that further expansion came to depend on increased doses of the same medicine rather than a reduction of the dosage. As to the human resource dimension, it is now widely agreed that deficiencies in personal skills—management, marketing, technological competence etc.—constitute a greater impediment to indigenous industrial development than scarcity of physical capital or finance. Yet it is only in the last decade or so that steps have been taken to redirect incentives and policies to address the human deficiencies.

I would readily concede that these weaknesses themselves require further explanation. They are clearly symptoms of something deeper, the more fundamental explanation of which may lie in the culture, political framework, distribution of power and resources, and various forces on which other authors have focused. What then is the point of the more proximate explanation which we advanced? I would claim two merits. If we are correct in identifying these major weaknesses, then they provide a useful framework within which (i) to explore a deeper understanding, and (ii) to design better strategies for the future. The second of these was uppermost in our minds, and I might draw an analogy between our approach and the prevailing treatment of psychiatric illnesses. Many such illnesses are now treated as arising from a chemical imbalance which can be restored to order by the administration of a variety of drugs. I doubt if anyone regards such an explanation as more than a proximate one, but if

the practice of psychiatry had to await ultimate explanations before applying remedies, then it might have to wait a long time. Similarly the formulation of economic strategies cannot wait until the ultimate explanations arrive—if they ever do—but must proceed on the basis of interim but, hopefully, intelligent judgements.

Future Prospects

In a paper on the Irish experience of economic development, it may seem odd to discuss future prospects when there is so much we do not know about the past. Nevertheless, a brief forward look can be justified for two reasons. First, an assessment of future prospects may give greater perspective to our present view of the past. In this connection it should be noted that the research for the studies mentioned above took place in the middle of the 1980s, a time when the Irish economy fared particularly badly and pessimism and demoralisation abounded. It is conceivable that this could have coloured the perspective of some or all of the authors, so that a forward look in the light of the improvement at the end of the decade may provide a useful corrective. Second, if it emerges that Ireland has established a firm basis for future progress, this would take some of the sting out of its poor record up to now.

In many important respects Ireland is now structurally better adapted to develop economically in the future than it was in the 1920s. No longer is it totally dependent on one slowly-growing market (the UK) and on one slowly-growing product (food). Managerial and industrial skills have been improved and are more widely dispersed among the labour force. A much smaller proportion of the labour force is located in activities (agriculture and domestic service) subject to inevitable decline. There is a more sensible awareness of the constraints and opportunities facing Ireland, and a considerable body of experience on which to draw. The EC connection is forcing Ireland to learn from other models besides the UK. The financial collapse that threatened a few years ago, as a result of the inexorable growth of national debt, has been averted by the Programme for National Recovery and associated policies.

The deterioration in the world economy that became evident from the onset of the Iraqi crisis in the autumn of 1990 has led to a marked reduction in growth in 1991. Even more worrying it has led to record unemployment levels as emigration dropped off with the rising unemployment in Britain: by July 1991 the number on the Live Register had reached an all-time high of 261,000. Yet the ESRI *Medium Term Review 1991–1996*, published in June 1991, took a moderately optimistic view of the medium-term outlook.

Following what it saw as a temporary slow-down in 1991, it projected a resumption of steady growth of GNP up to 1996 at an average rate of 3.5 per cent per annum. Inflation would remain low, the balance of payments in surplus, and the ratio of national debt to GNP would continue declining to a level of 93 per cent in 1996 compared with 137 per cent in 1987.

Even with this relatively rosy outlook, however, the prospects for the labour market remain bleak. While the *Medium-Term Review* projected an increase in total employment of about 50,000 over the five-year period (or somewhat less than 1 per cent per annum), this would be quite inadequate to bring down unemployment or prevent a resumption in emigration once the UK labour market improves. Ireland is faced with a situation in which the natural flow into the labour force will continue at a high rate (over 20,000 per annum) until near the end of the decade, since the birth rate began to fall only after 1980. Consequently, Ireland's most intractable problem seems set to persist up to the end of the century, at least. Neither is it clear that Ireland is on the way to developing a strong indigenous manufacturing sector, while the outlook for its agricultural sector is uncertain as a result of the impending reform of the EC Common Agricultural Policy.

In seeking to strengthen its development base in the 1990s to cope with the major problems of labour surplus and low living standards, Ireland will be operating as a member of the European Community which is on the way to becoming ever more closely integrated. While economists are not unanimous on the subject, the weight of opinion favours the view that economic integration in itself will not bring about convergence of the less developed regions, particularly those on the periphery, and indeed there are reasons why it might lead to greater divergence. (Padao-Schioppa, 1987; NESCS, 1989). The dilemma posed for Ireland is that, while closer economic union limits the range of development policies that can be applied at national level, there is as yet no indication that adequate regional policies will be implemented at Community level. The next ten years, during which Ireland retains considerable freedom of action to lift itself, will obviously be critical in shaping the course of the economy well into the next century. It is encouraging that this is recognised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions which, in its proposals for a new programme to follow the Programme for National Recovery, argued the need for the social partners to agree on a ten-year development strategy, noting that Ireland's fundamental structural problems 'owe much to our failure, as a nation, to lay down a long-term strategy for development' (ICTU, 1990). The latter conclusion is one with which I think all of the authors of the recent studies on Irish economic development would agree, though it should be added that Hardiman (1988) showed that absence of long-term

perspective was in the past as prevalent in the trade union movement as elsewhere in Ireland.

My own book concluded with the following sentence: 'Provided Ireland can recognise its past failings, and begin to learn to overcome them, then its potential for future development is considerable'. I stand by that sentence, but would also add that the future outlook is not so encouraging as to make any of the authors want to revise significantly what they had to say about the past.

Major Gaps

I have tried to give a brief sketch of where, on the basis of recent studies, we stand in terms of our understanding of Irish economic development. It only remains for me to indicate some of the key gaps in our understanding. Some of these emerge from the recent interpretations, while others have not been dealt with at all in these perspectives.

Major data deficiencies

Official national income estimates begin only from 1938 and the available estimates prior to then badly need to be re-examined. There are many puzzles about the course of the economy in the 1920s and 1930s which cannot be explored satisfactorily until annual national income estimates are made for this period. This is a feasible, though laborious, research task. Indeed it would be possible to provide national income estimates going back to about the middle of the nineteenth century that would be of comparable quality to those widely used for several other European countries. The availability of such estimates, apart from facilitating existing researchers, would have the additional merit of attracting other labourers to the vineyard. Scholars like Maddison, interested in long-term comparative studies, are anxious to include as many countries as possible in their sample. The reason why Ireland is omitted from, and Finland included in, so many such studies is mainly because Ireland has not generated the required long-term estimates—thereby impoverishing research on Ireland.

Another major deficiency in economic statistics is the limited availability of capital stock estimates. The recent study by Henry (1989) has made a valiant effort to repair this deficiency for the period since the Second World War by providing estimates for all sectors, whereas previously estimates were available only for industry. Henry's estimates avowedly leave room for improvement, but, like all statistics, they will be improved best by use. The derivation of capital stock estimates prior to

the Second World War would only become a feasible project following the provision of data on investment as part of the compilation of national income estimates referred to above.

Establishing the state of the economy at independence

One of the first difficulties facing anyone investigating Irish economic development since independence is getting a good fix on the starting point. The difficulty stems not only from the poor quality of the data but also from the paucity of research on how Ireland reached that position. As previously mentioned, available estimates suggest that Ireland at independence had a surprisingly high average level of income per capita in a European context. Yet only about seventy years earlier, prior to the Great Famine of 1845–47, it had been widely perceived as having one of the lowest average living standards in Europe.⁷ Clearly these two positions are reconcilable only if Ireland had a relatively rapid growth in average income per capita in the seventy years or so prior to independence. Yet most outside commentators have assumed that it grew more slowly than the UK, and although economic historians in Ireland have been aware that this assumption is not well founded, they have not taken the trouble to document the overall position. This gap has arisen partly because systematic aggregate estimates have not been made, and partly because the prime focus of many Irish economic historians is on ‘micro’ and local developments.

There is a fascinating story here waiting to be documented, which is not only of innate interest but undoubtedly has profound implications for the subsequent course of events after independence. What seems to have happened is that Ireland did indeed have a relatively rapid rise in average income per capita despite having a very low growth in total real output. This came about not only because of the massive fall in population but also because real income was augmented by favourable terms of trade, which encouraged specialisation in favourably priced livestock production and in turn intensified population decline. In addition real disposable income was probably boosted further by increased emigrants’ remittances, a reversal of net factor income outflows (interest on capital and rent), and possibly greater government net transfers. Moreover, there must have been enormous changes in the distribution of income since the decline in

⁷ Louis Cullen has pointed out to me that this perception may have been formed incorrectly from the gross inequality in income distribution and resulting extreme poverty, so that we cannot be certain that overall average income was exceptionally low in Ireland by the European standards of the time.

population predominantly affected the poorest element: among other things, this factor produces the statistical quirk of raising average income without any necessary improvement for the remaining population. In short, the broad picture seems to be that Ireland achieved a respectable standard of living without experiencing a corresponding real development — a very unusual situation.

The anomaly is compounded by the fact that the crude estimates we have for the 1920s suggest that the average income level in Northern Ireland was not much greater than in the rest of the country. This is surprising given that the North is generally thought of as more prosperous at the time of the Famine, and that subsequently the North experienced considerable industrialisation whereas the South, if anything, experienced de-industrialisation.

Neoclassical framework

Earlier, I mentioned the absence of a systematic quantitative analysis of Irish economic development along mainstream neoclassical lines. A standard growth accounting methodology, derived from neoclassical analysis and pioneered in the 1960s by Edward Denison for the US, has now been applied to a wide range of countries.⁸ This methodology does not provide a fundamental explanation of economic growth: rather it 'accounts for' growth in the sense of quantifying the contribution of all the various inputs that can be identified, relying basically on neoclassical assumptions to justify the use of distributive shares in national income as weights. Nevertheless, the availability of such an analysis for Ireland would greatly sharpen the focus of thinking about Irish economic development.⁹ The body of data now available makes this a feasible exercise at least for the period since the Second World War.

Neoclassical economics also attaches great importance to the deleterious effects of such factors as price distortions, the possibility of the exchange rate having been overvalued, tax disincentives, restrictive practices, employment protection legislation etc. Yet there has been little attempt over the long-term to identify these systematically and to quantify their effects in order to assess how far they might go to explaining Ireland's mediocre record. This would be particularly interesting in regard to the

⁸ The application of this methodology formed the core of the major study of UK economic growth from 1856 to 1973 by Matthews *et al.* (1982), who then used the results as a foundation for exploring more fundamental causes.

⁹ An application of this approach to Ireland as one of a group of countries was made by Balassa and Bertrand (1970) but the application was limited to manufacturing industry.

allocation of entrepreneurial effort in view of the central importance attached by all writers to Ireland's unimpressive record in developing indigenous industry. Baumol (1990) has argued recently that differences between countries in the allocation of entrepreneurial talent among different activities are of far more consequence than differences in the total supply of entrepreneurs. Moreover, the reward structure profoundly influences the allocation of enterprise between productive and nonproductive activities, and 'the prevailing rules that affect the allocation of entrepreneurial activity can be observed, described, and, with luck, modified and improved . . .' Such an analysis would not necessarily conflict with that of O'Malley if it emerged that the relative reward structure applying to different activities is strongly influenced by late development.

Cross-country and cross-regional comparisons

It is surprising how little interest scholars in the South and North of Ireland, with some exceptions, have shown in studying each others' economy since partition. Both have tended to look more towards the UK than towards each other. Even less work has been done by way of comparing the Republic with other regions of the UK. Such comparisons would often prove more enlightening than comparison with the UK as a whole. They would, for instance, help us to address more meaningfully the question of how much independence mattered to the Republic, distinguishing the degree to which political independence was accompanied by economic freedom from the uses made of that freedom.

Systematic attempts to learn from the experience of other small European countries are only at the beginning stage, but offer the prospect of rich insights. In particular, once the quantifiable differences in such variables as natural resource endowments, growth of factor inputs and productivity, access to external markets etc. have been systematically isolated, such comparative studies could help to provide a more definite assessment of the importance of the political, social and cultural influences that are not readily quantifiable. Such comparative work is essential to examine various hypotheses needing further investigation, such as the nature of national institutions conducive to innovation, the significance of consensus and corporatist arrangements, and the possibility of virtuous or vicious cycles of development. A major study commissioned by the National Economic and Social Council and recently completed explores such issues for Ireland in companion with a number of other small European countries (Mjøset, 1992).

Consequences of emigration

The most unique features of Irish economic experience lie in the demographic area, and in particular in the scale and character of emigration. There is general agreement that emigration is a consequence of poor economic development, but no similar agreement about the feedback impact of emigration on subsequent development. Plausible arguments can be made that emigration relieved pressures that would otherwise have led to immiserisation of the population. The recent NESC report (Sexton *et al.*, 1991), for instance, concluded that there was no firm evidence that high emigration leads to lower economic growth, and even went so far as to say that 'there is evidence that the rise in population that would have followed the cessation of emigration would have had adverse repercussions on living standards' (p. 235). But it is also possible to take an alternative view, and plausible arguments can be made that, while the short-term impact of emigration was to improve living standards for those remaining, its longer-term consequences were corrosive. Proponents of this view, such as Kennedy *et al.* (1988) and Lee (1989), emphasise the long-run impact of emigration in limiting the scale of the home market and in removing pressures to reform a conservative and conformist social structure, the institutions of which were ill-adapted to innovation. In this view emigration is seen as a major cause, as well as a consequence, of Ireland's poor rate of development, and it would figure as a key link in any interpretation of Ireland's experience as a vicious circle in contrast with the virtuous circles in other small European countries.

Any research contributing to a resolution of this issue would be of wider interest now in an EC context, given the differing views on the degree to which emigration might provide an avenue towards convergence for the peripheral low income areas of the Community.

The services sector

It is now platitudinous to bemoan the paucity of attention to the services sector, given that in most modern economies the sector now accounts for about 60 per cent or more of the labour force. Nevertheless the point is worth repeating for Ireland since even at independence the services sector was substantial. The share of the labour force then engaged in services (33 per cent) was higher than in many other countries at a similar stage of their development—the share in Finland, for instance, at about the same time was probably less than 15 per cent—while, as a proportion of non-agricultural employment, the services sector was quite exceptionally dominant in Ireland, accounting for almost three-quarters of the total.

A major reason for the widespread neglect of services is the belief that its growth, unlike industry, is a consequence rather than a cause of development. Even if that is true, there are still important reasons for concentrating greater attention on this sector. For example, Irish economists have been considerably exercised by the fact that state policy subsidised capital when there was a perennial labour surplus, but the main focus of their attack has been on the manufacturing sector. In fact, however, in the ten years 1974–84 manufacturing accounted for only one-fifth of gross fixed investment (and much less earlier on) whereas services absorbed over one-third and dwellings a further one-quarter—and in both these areas capital was often priced well below its social opportunity cost. If, therefore, the subsidisation of capital was a major factor explaining the non-absorption of surplus labour, then the services sector deserves at least as close an examination as the manufacturing sector.

There are of course many other issues worthy of study in relation to the role of services, such as the adequacy of the part played by the financial sector in encouraging productive development, or the degree to which considerations of security and status led parents to push the brightest children towards safe jobs in the public service and the professions. More attention to the services sector, apart from its direct importance, might throw light on some of Ireland's more obvious failures in economic development, such as the poor performance of indigenous industry.

I hope, therefore, that in this paper I have managed to show that while the recent spate of studies on Irish economic development have left many unanswered questions, they have opened up the subject in a way that will give lasting and productive employment to an enlarged group of scholars!

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