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**A ‘SUDDEN OUTCRY’ FOR FREE TRADE: AUTONOMY, EMPIRE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN
THE IRISH FREE TRADE CAMPAIGN, 1779-1785**

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Abstract: In November 1779, the group of Irish militias known as the Volunteers rallied around a statue of King William III in Dublin protesting for free trade between Ireland and Britain. The episode kickstarted a series of political negotiations around the topic that culminated in the abortive proposal for the establishment of a free trade area in 1785. From the Irish perspective, free trade was regarded as a strategy for eliminating the restrictions and regulations, emanating from London, which had so far stifled the development of local industry. In Britain, however, the proposal faced hostilities due to the expected dislocations for established manufacturing interests. Newly appointed prime minister William Pitt tried to justify the case for free trade with Ireland before the British public by appealing to its beneficial effects for a unified and coherent imperial trade policy. This, in turn, proved unacceptable to Irish politicians and agitators, who regarded free trade as a step in the route to more – not less – political autonomy. Exploring public arguments on this topic, the paper investigates the economic and political meanings associated with free trade during the later decades of the 18th century, while discussing how these notions related to the literature on political economy circulating at the time.

Keywords: free trade, protection, British Empire, Ireland, Josiah Tucker, Adam Smith

There are many theorems of trade which are plausible on paper, yet it may be impossible for trading nations to adopt them. Maxims being too narrow to embrace all the combinations of human events, political operations must often be influenced by circumstances.

–William Eden, *A Letter to the Earl of Carlisle*

1. Introduction

One could make a robust claim for ‘free trade’ as the most powerful slogan in the history of political economy. For over two centuries, the weight of economic expertise has been recurrently used to advocate for policies aimed at diminishing or abolishing existing barriers to the flow of commodities across national boundaries, with the ostensible purpose of maximizing universal economic welfare. Since the mid-19th century, this proposition has been theoretically anchored in some form or another of the doctrine of comparative advantages, famously singled out by Paul Samuelson (1969, p. 9) as a rare proposition in the social sciences that is both “non-trivial” and “logically true”. Samuelson himself had been responsible for adding yet another layer of sophistication to this venerable theoretical tradition with his factor price equalization theorem, which obliquely addressed the age-old concern that ‘poor countries’ could undersell ‘rich countries’ in the absence of barriers to trade, due to the relative cheapness of their factors of production.¹ His enthusiasm for positivist epistemology notwithstanding, Samuelson (1948, p. 183) could not resist “the dangerous task of drawing a practical moral from an abstract theoretical argument,” arguing for free trade as a better policy than mass emigration for a stagnant industrial economy like the UK during the postwar years. It may thus seem ironic, though hardly surprising, that international trade theory should be so extensively used in support of specific political agendas, serving as a permanent reminder of the flimsy boundaries separating positive from normative claims in economics.

As a political slogan, however, free trade has a much longer history than the theoretical arguments that have been lending it credibility since the times of David Ricardo, Robert Torrens,

¹ For encompassing overviews of early modern arguments on the dynamics of international competition between ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ countries, see Hont (1983, 2008).

and John Stuart Mill. In the early years of the 17th century, for instance, a robust ‘free trade’ campaign gathered momentum in the English parliament, propelled by the discontent of provincial merchants with the closed and elitist practices of the London-based mercantile companies (Ashton 1967; Rabb 1968; Croft 1975). The ideological contours of this movement, however, were quite different from the cosmopolitan platform later popularized by Richard Cobden. Even if we find it difficult, nowadays, to conceive of free trade as something other than the abolition of tariffs and other barriers to international trade, nothing could be further from the minds of early Stuart agitators, who campaigned for the right to participate in the highly regulated activities of the London corporations. By embracing the free trade motto, their pleas resonated with an understanding of the English constitution that saw monopolies as a violation of the liberties of subjects, thus connecting to recurring arguments in political economy prior to the Civil Wars (Suprinyak 2018).

One might be tempted to regard this as a fortuitous early appearance of an expression that would later be defined rigorously by political economists of a more enlightened age. Another, more historically consistent reading would indicate how 19th century political economists appropriated themselves of a catchphrase that had served for centuries as a rallying cry in multiple political battles. This paper will pursue the latter trail by exploring an episode that occurred at the precise moment when the modern canonical discourse of political economy was first being forged. In the late 1770s, while the War of American Independence raised questions about the future of the British Empire, an organized popular movement emerged in Ireland demanding abolition of the many restraints the British crown had imposed on Irish trade since the times of the Cromwellian settlement. Stridently anchored on the free trade slogan, the movement forced a temporarily weakened English government to the negotiating table, leading to a round of significant concessions followed by a proposal for a comprehensive free trade zone between Britain and Ireland. The latter ultimately floundered, however, on political disputes about what ‘free trade’ should mean in practice. While the English were already prepared, by the late 18th century, to confront domestic manufacturing interests by lifting restrictions on the production and export of Irish woolen textiles, the free trade movement remained indissociably linked, within Irish politics, to more ambitious claims for political autonomy.

James Livesey (2013) studied in detail how the meanings associated to free trade in these Anglo-Irish arguments related to different conceptions of the British Empire and the

models of political economy appropriate to them. He portrayed British prime minister William Pitt as committed to a ‘Smithian ideal’ of free trade, based on efficiency-generating market discipline, while facing opposition in Ireland from ‘neo-Machiavellian’ free traders who subordinated trade policy to the larger political ambitions of the Irish nation. By reexamining the pamphlet agitation over Irish free trade, this paper will argue there was no recognizable ‘Smithian ideal’ of free trade in the decade following the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*. Adam Smith’s recent work was used, alongside other sources, to support markedly different claims about the proper economic relationship between Britain and Ireland. More importantly, the terms of the debate were essentially dictated by practical and political considerations, rather than abstract arguments of political economy. More than simply chronicling the evolving semantics of the free trade slogan, my purpose is to highlight how the latter acquired rhetorical force, at different historical moments, from its direct attachment to broader ideological agendas – and how the incorporation of free trade into the canon of 19th century political economy should be understood against this background.

2. The Irish Free Trade Movement

The history of Anglo-Irish trade relations since Cromwell’s reconquest moved in tandem with the process of increasing ‘nationalization’ of economic policy in England began after the Restoration and intensified with the 1688 Revolution (Ormrod 2003, pp. 31-59). From the early 1660s, the Navigation Acts restricted direct access of Irish merchants to most of the plantation trade, thus highlighting Ireland’s ambiguous status, between a colony and a ‘sister kingdom’, within the emerging British empire (Powell 2003, pp. 1-5). The Cattle Act of 1667, which forbade the importation of Irish cattle into England to appease landowners who protested declining rents, made even more explicit the English government’s willingness to sacrifice Irish economic interests when pressed by domestic groups (Edie 1970). The shifting of Irish pastures from cattle to sheep-raising paved the way to the most bitterly contested of the economic regulations imposed on Ireland. With the Woollen Act of 1699, the English parliament placed a complete ban on the exportation of Irish woollen textiles, including to Great Britain and the colonial dominions, while restricting the sale of raw wool and yarn exclusively to England. The act was the culmination of an intense lobbying campaign by English cloth manufactures, led in

the public arena by the Bristol merchant John Cary (Kearney 1959; Kelly 1980). Even if the Irish linen trade, offered by England as compensation for the loss of the woolen industry, evolved into a thriving business during the 18th century, the 1699 Act remained a symbol of the subordinate and vulnerable position of Ireland within Britain's imperial designs (Reinert 2011, pp. 106-113).

The economic implications of these arguments over trade regulation, important as they were, did not fully exhaust the matter, which frequently spilled over into broader constitutional disputes. The Woollen Act found its political counterpart in the Declaratory Act of 1720, which legally confirmed the powers of the English parliament to pass legislation binding Ireland. While its status as a separate kingdom gave Ireland the right to its own parliamentary assembly, the latter's autonomy had been curtailed since early Tudor times by Poynings' Law, which conferred on the English Privy Council the authority to amend or reject legislation drafted by the Irish parliament. The Declaratory Act formally increased British political tutelage over Ireland even further and became a recurrent bone of contention in Anglo-Irish relations for the remainder of the century (Bartlett 2004). The overlapping of economic and constitutional arguments throughout this period is vividly illustrated by the fate of William Molyneux's pamphlet *The Case of Ireland Stated* (1698), which asserted Ireland's right to be treated as a legitimate partner in the British empire, fundamentally distinct from the American colonies (Armitage 2000, pp. 153-157). First published during the Woollen Act debates to critically engage the standpoint of John Cary and his followers, the pamphlet caused indignation in English political circles and was rebutted by both Cary and Charles Davenant (Kelly 1980; Reinert 2011, pp. 107-110). It was later reprinted in the 1720s amid controversy over the Declaratory Act and the Wood's Halfpence scheme, and gradually turned into a powerful symbol of Irish patriot politics over the following decades (Kelly 1988).

The American revolution provided an occasion for these long-brewing economic and political grievances to coalesce anew. The ambiguous constitutional status of Ireland and repeated encroachments by the British government predisposed segments of Irish society and political elite to sympathize with the cause of the American rebels. These sentiments were then intensified by a series of events prompted by British engagement in the war of independence. The conflict disrupted established trading networks across the Atlantic and deprived Ireland of the American market for some of its staple products, such as linen textiles. The adverse economic situation was compounded by a controversial decision by the British government to

impose an embargo on the export of Irish provisions, to secure the supply of the British army and navy (Morley 2002, pp. 157-161). As the war effort escalated, British troops stationed in Ireland had to be dispatched to America, and their replacement proved difficult given the absence of a legal framework for the recruitment and maintenance of an Irish militia. This opened the way to one of the defining episodes in the history of late-18th century Anglo-Irish politics: the rise of the Volunteer movement, in 1778. The Volunteers were self-funded local militia groups created to protect Ireland from the double threat of domestic uprisings and foreign invasion. Their strategic importance, especially after France and Spain entered the American war, conferred significant bargaining power on the movement, whose actions quickly became highly politicized (Morley 2002, pp. 198-203; Powell 2003, pp. 149-175).

When demands for free trade erupted in the Irish scene in 1779, the Volunteers were their immediate popular face. The government of prime minister Lord North had been preparing a package of commercial concessions to appease Irish discontent over depressed economic conditions, which promised to open a significant share of the plantation trade to Irish merchants. But these measures were curtailed due to opposition from mercantile interests in Northern England and Scotland, and the concessions ultimately offered to Ireland seemed to pale in comparison to the generous conditions extended to the Americans by the Carlisle peace commission (Powell 2003, pp. 162-165). To many, this was clear evidence that Britain was prepared to recompense American rebelliousness better than Irish loyalty, which fueled a reinvigorated campaign for commercial reform with increasingly confrontational overtones. Volunteer parades now brandished slogans threatening violent action in case Britain did not grant 'a free trade' to Ireland, and these popular displays were reinforced by more concrete measures ranging from non-importation associations against British products to public intimidation of members of the Irish parliament (Higgins 2007). The patriot opposition in Ireland, invoking the spirit of Molyneux, seized the occasion to mount a campaign for the wholesale abolition of existing constraints on Irish trade.

Caught up in a losing war in America, the British government was forced to concede to Irish pressure. Between late 1779 and early 1780, the North ministry repealed many of the acts that stood at the root of discontent, most notably allowing Ireland freely to export its woolen and glass manufactures. Ireland was also granted the right to trade directly with the British colonies – the dominions controlled by the East India Company only excepted – with the sole condition that

articles imported from the colonies were imposed the same duties levied in Britain (Oldham 1917; Morley 2002, pp. 231-233). Even if these concessions fell short of completely liberating Irish trade from British oversight and regulation, they did incorporate Ireland into imperial trade networks upon more equal terms. The measures were well-received at first by Irish political elites and popular opinion, but soon became the object of renewed agitation over their implications for ongoing constitutional disputes.

The issue now revolved around the true political motivation behind Britain's recent commercial concessions. The Irish patriots regarded these as a long overdue restoration of the natural rights of their kingdom, but many suspected Britain of acting merely out of political expediency in this episode. If the latter was indeed the case, the concessions would never rest on a secure footing unless accompanied by other constitutional reforms that removed from Britain the power to legislate for Ireland in matters of trade, and hence to reintroduce restrictive measures as soon as conditions permitted. 'Rights' and 'expediency' thus became key terms in a charged polemic that culminated in the repeal of the Declaratory Act in 1782, a move ratified the following year with a bill of recognition of Ireland's exclusive legislative and judicial rights (Powell 2003, 196-230). This inaugurated an era of Irish parliamentary independence that lasted until the passage of the Acts of Union in 1800. Under the new settlement, Ireland now had autonomy to enact its own commercial legislation – including the right to impose duties on British imports. By then, Irish hopes of securing economic advantages from the trade concessions had been curtailed by other events, such as the Portuguese refusal to recognize Ireland's claim to enjoy the benefits of the Methuen Treaty between Britain and Portugal, which made it clear how Ireland's right to a 'free trade' remained closely dependent on British imperial diplomacy (Lammey 1986). These and other frustrations contributed to the emergence of a campaign for the imposition of 'protecting duties' on British goods, a popular topic in Ireland during 1783-84 despite some reticence from the Irish parliament itself (Collison Black 1950, p. 313; Schweitzer 1984, pp. 129-130).

Ireland's position within the imperial trading system thus remained remarkably ambiguous even after the many recent rounds of reform. The British government's response came in the shape of new prime minister William Pitt's commercial propositions, first presented to the scrutiny of the Irish parliament in February 1785. The purpose of the original ten resolutions was to promote greater equalization of reciprocal duties between Britain and Ireland,

clarify the status of Ireland in commercial treaties negotiated by Britain, and reform the Navigation Acts to allow Ireland to benefit from the re-export trade in colonial products. In return, Ireland was expected to contribute to the maintenance of the imperial navy with resources drawn from its hereditary revenue (Schweitzer 1984). Even if the latter condition generated some controversy, an amended version of Pitt's scheme easily passed the Irish House of Commons only a few weeks later. In Britain, however, the bill faced a concerted attack from the parliamentary opposition and established manufacturing interests, the latter of which rallied around the newly created General Chamber of Manufacturers to protect themselves against what they perceived as threatening competition from cheap labor Irish industry (Semmel 1970, pp. 34-35; Kelly 1975). The proposal could only pass after substantial modification, including a new resolution stipulating the Irish parliament should confirm, by its own legislative authority, all future measures passed by its British counterpart on matters of navigation and colonial trade.

The resolution was part of a clear attempt to bring Ireland more firmly into the imperial fold, granting it access to the benefits of British trading networks while guaranteeing Irish politics would not interfere with the empire's larger policy designs. But in Ireland, the move was perceived as an attempted encroachment over recently conquered constitutional independence, thus irreversibly dooming negotiations. The revised commercial propositions were dropped by the British government after the Irish parliament voted by only a narrow margin to admit the bill for debate. Even if the project had promised to finally create something resembling a free trade area between Britain and Ireland, it ultimately floundered on the commitment of Irish political elites – fueled by an energized public opinion – to a powerful symbolic statement of political emancipation.

3. The Political Economy of Free Trade

In his classic study on the origins of free trade ideology in Britain, Bernard Semmel (1970, pp. 30-44) pointed to the influence of Josiah Tucker over the trade policy pursued by William Pitt during the 1780s, of which the Irish propositions were an exemplary illustration. Even if Pitt and his supporters did not explicitly evoke the authority of Tucker to reinforce their position, many other elements indeed support the notion that the latter played an important role

in arguments over Anglo-Irish trade relations at the time.² His *Four Tracts on Political and Commercial Subjects* was first published in 1774, and a third edition had already appeared in print by 1776. The work made available, for the first time to a broad audience, Tucker's celebrated argument on the competitive advantages enjoyed by rich countries when trading with their poorer neighbors, due to productivity gains associated with acquired skills, capital stock, technical improvements, and scale of operations.³ This position had direct implications for the lingering disputes over commercial restraints on Ireland, as it undermined the claims of special interest groups in Britain about the competitive threat presented by Irish industry, due to lower taxes and wages (Hont 2008). In his fourth tract, Tucker also developed a forceful argument in favor of a definitive separation between Britain and its American colonies, which included an appeal for union between Britain and Ireland as the core of a renewed British commercial empire (Tucker 1776, pp. 151-224).

When the Irish free trade campaign began to stir animosities between the two countries a few years later, Tucker built on some of his earlier ideas to intervene in the emerging public debate. In a short piece published in the *Westminster Magazine* in October 1779, he restated his criticism of colonial policy and other monopolistic regulations, like the Navigation Acts, before examining the current commercial disputes between Britain and Ireland. "I always must consider these two neighbouring islands as making but one State," Tucker argued, before adding he did not see "how an addition of territory in any part of the globe could add anything to our native strength, or internal security" (Tucker 1779, p. 579). This natural communion of interests made recent bickering all the more unfortunate, as both parties seemed to be "quarelling about shadows, and in the mean time are losing sight of the substance." Tucker resorted to his arguments on the competitive advantages enjoyed by richer nations to reduce the Anglo-Irish conflict to a futility. The Irish had always been free to supply their own needs with domestic manufactures, but continued to rely extensively on British imports, which could be obtained

² Semmel attributed this lack of public recognition to Tucker's criticism of Whig policy toward the American colonies, which won him the favor of Lord North and other Tories. Tucker was also a long-standing advocate for the cause of a union between Ireland and Great Britain (Shelton 1981, pp. 60-61, 254-255). As this was a very sensitive subject among Irish public opinion, avoiding his name may have been part of a tactical move to steer clear of needless political controversy.

³ Tucker had first developed this argument in a polemic with David Hume in the 1750s. Hont (1983) is the classic study of this episode, later expanded in Hont (2008) to include detailed discussion of how the rich country-poor country debate was informed by, and later informed, Anglo-Irish trade relations during the 18th century.

better and cheaper. “Why then are the English afraid of such rivals as these at a foreign market,” Tucker asked, “who are not able, at least are not willing to supply even their own markets as cheap as we sell to them?” But his reprobation was not reserved for shortsighted English merchants and manufacturers only. Even if he approved in principle of Irish demands for a free trade, their methods betrayed an erroneous understanding of the nature of their problems. Rather than entering associations to restrict the consumption of British imports, the Irish should worry about improving their own manufactures – otherwise, Tucker once again inquired, “how can you expect to rival Great Britain in her foreign trade, when you cannot meet her on equal terms, even in your own market?” A more candid appraisal would reveal “the true cause of the poverty and distresses of Ireland must be sought for in Ireland itself, and not elsewhere” (p. 580).

While Tucker’s arguments on the nature of commercial intercourse between rich and poor nations gained increasing acceptance, the implications he drew from them to interpret the Anglo-Irish trade dispute proved more controversial. An anonymous pamphlet published the same year defended Ireland’s non-importation associations against Tucker’s attack in his *Westminster Magazine* piece. Curiously, the pamphlet called for some of the same liberal commercial reforms advocated by Tucker. “I am,” the author stated, “persuaded that regulations of trade are dangerous in general. Leave it to itself; and perfect liberty will do for it what nothing else can” (*The First Lines of Ireland’s Interest*, 1779, p. 16). England’s “insatiable rage of monopoly” was a sure route to commercial decay. But “monopoly is the instinct of corporations, as selfishness is that of individuals,” so that it became “the duty of reason to counteract the vicious excess of both these propensities; and make them, unknown to themselves, subserve the public good” (p. 70). Like Tucker, the author believed the best imperial policy would be to consider Britain and Ireland “as one territory, and without partiality to promote their commerce to every other part of the world, rather than to each other” (p. 17). But if their “philosophical and commercial sister” failed to realize this on her own, the Irish had every right to take practical measures, like non-importation agreements, to help awaken her consciousness – “to obtain from the self-interest of Great Britain, what could not be extorted from her justice” (p. 25).

A similar vision of a reinvigorated commercial empire firmly anchored on the ensemble of the British Isles was put forth by William Eden, a prominent British politician who then served as secretary to the Board of Trade and had recently participated in the Earl of Carlisle’s Peace Commission to America. In one of his letters to Carlisle, circulated in print in 1779, Eden

encouraged England to come to the rescue of Ireland in her hour of distress. “Great Britain cannot hesitate to give relief,” he argued, as “the principle wing of her buildings is in danger; it is for the safety and strength of the great center-edifice, that every part should be diligently examined, and sufficiently repaired” (Eden 1779, p. 5). But the Irish now claimed “nothing short of a free trade can give relief,” as they attributed all their misfortunes to the “monopolizing spirit” of Britain. Even if Eden believed that “in these days of liberal science and disquisition, the respectable and leading men in this kingdom [...] are unlikely to inclose themselves within the rusty and rugged armour of Monopoly,” he recognized there was a plausible argument against introducing such sudden and encompassing changes in a commercial system that had been working to good effect for centuries (pp. 10-17). Still, he looked forward to an era when jealousy of trade would no longer stand in the way of collaboration between Britain and Ireland:

It is now well understood that the flourishing of neighbouring nations in their trade is to our advantage, and that if we could extinguish their industry and manufactures, our own would languish from the want of emulation and interchange. This reasoning is, or ought to be, still better understood with respect to different parts of the same empire. If we are capable of looking beyond the extent of a single shop-board, we cannot consider the Irish as rivals in interest, even though they should become our associates in lucrative pursuits. (Eden 1779, pp. 20-21)

Eden’s letter has received considerable attention in the literature due to a covert connection to Adam Smith. After the Irish parliament carried the petition for a free trade in early October, Eden wrote to Henry Dundas, an influential Scottish politician, asking him to inquire after Smith’s opinion on the subject (Browning 1886). In his reply to Dundas, Smith declared himself broadly in favor of trade concessions to Ireland. For one thing, British fears of Irish competition were unfounded, as “Ireland has neither the skill, nor the stock which could enable Her to rival England, and tho’ both may be acquired in time, to acquire them compleatly will require the operation of little less than a Century.” Moreover, resistance to the proposal in Britain was mostly associated with narrow special interest groups:

I perfectly agree with your Lordship too that to Crush the Industry of so great and so fine a Province of the Empire, in order to favour the monopoly of some particular Towns in Scotland or England is equally injurious and impolitic. The general opulence and improvement of Ireland might certainly under proper management afford much greater Resources to Government than can ever be drawn from a few mercantile or manufacturing Towns. (Smith, *Corr*, 201)

Handling the situation involved political challenges, however, not the least due to the ambiguity inherent in Irish appeals for a ‘free trade’. After pondering over the precise nature of their demands, Smith came up with four different possible meanings. By ‘free trade’, the Irish might be referring to the right to (1) freely export their products to the best foreign market, (2) obtain their imports from the cheapest market, subject only to duties imposed by their own parliament, (3) trade freely with the American and African plantations, or (4) enjoy free access to the British market, without any discriminatory duties imposed on Irish products. Even if he believed all these demands to be inherently reasonable and not against the interests of Britain, Smith recognized some of them would “interfere with some of our monopolies.” He finally summarized his advice to Dundas and Eden in the following terms:

Whatever the Irish mean to demand in this way, in the present situation of our affairs, I should think it madness not to grant it. Whatever they may demand, our manufacturers, unless the leading & principal men among them are properly dealt with beforehand, will probably oppose it. That they may be so dealt with, I know from experience, and that it may be done at little expence and with no great trouble. I could even point out some persons, who, I think, are fit and likely to deal with them successfully for this purpose. (Smith, *Corr*, 201)

Rather than presenting a universal case for free trade, Smith offered pragmatic advice based on his insight into the current state of British and Irish politics. Without mentioning his name, Eden accordingly incorporated Smith’s taxonomy of ‘free trade’ policies to support his claim that the case involved “numerous, nice, and intricate” questions, which meant “theoretical deductions will not assist us” (Eden 1779, p. 6). “In all these reasonings,” he continued, “the commercial and the political interests are inseparably blended.” Ireland should be treated as “a jewel to our crown, and not a thorn in our side,” but this did not imply the entire “practical system of our trade” should be thrown overboard based on a “sudden outcry” for free trade. As Eden explained, “all these theorems of trade, however plausible they may appear on paper, must be received subject to much previous examinations, and a diligent discussion of all collateral circumstances” (p. 25).

If Eden seems to have built on Smith’s advice to formulate his case for a judicious reform of Anglo-Irish trade relations, it was a prominent figure in the Irish camp who relied most extensively on Smith’s authority during this first round of discussions. John Hely-Hutchison was a member of the Irish parliament for the city of Cork, who had worked closely with the British

administration in Ireland since being appointed Provost of Trinity College in 1774 (Powell 2003, p. 136-137). His *The Commercial Restraints of Ireland* (1779) offered an elaborate statement of the case for free trade, embedded in a long historical reconstruction of the measures enacted by England to constrain the commercial activity of Ireland. “This system of restraints, if it can be supposed to have been reasonable at the time when it was introduced,” Hely-Hutchison (1779, p. ix) proclaimed, is “now ruinous to Ireland and to the British empire.” The persistence of smuggling against all attempts to prohibit the exportation of wool demonstrated how “the policy of opening is far more efficacious than that of restraining.” Since “the world is become a great commercial society,” he continued, “exclude trade from one channel, and it seldom fails to find another” (p. 119). But England had chosen to treat Ireland as part of its “system of colonization”, even if the same complementarities between colonial and metropolitan produce did not exist between the two sister kingdoms. “The present state of the British empire requires new counsels,” Hely-Hutchison concluded, “and a system of commerce and of policy totally different from those which the circumstances of these countries, in the years 1663, 1670, and 1698, might have suggested” (pp. 189-190).

Hely-Hutchison relied on the *Wealth of Nations* to support many of his arguments. He attributed to Smith the insight that it was not absolute wealth, but rather a state of rapid growth, which caused wages to increase (p. 108); that Scotland did not manufacture its own wool due to scarcity of capital, when compared to England (p. 109); that mercantile capital tended to concentrate in large metropolitan areas (pp. 110-111); that public policy should not be guided by the opinions of interested merchants (p. 122); that domestic trade is more profitable to a nation than foreign trade (pp. 212-213); and that a more even distribution of wealth across society enlarges the capacity to pay taxes (p. 220). But despite alluding to the world as a “great commercial society”, Hely-Hutchison did not advocate free trade for Ireland based on cosmopolitan notions of political economy. Rather, his vision was steeped in the logic of empire:

Great Britain, weakened in her extremities, should fortify the heart of her empire; Great Britain, with powerful foreign enemies united in lasting bonds against her, and with scarcely any foreign alliance to sustain her, should exert every possible effort to strengthen herself at home. The numbers of people in Ireland have more than doubled in fourscore years. How much more rapid would be the increase if the growth of the human race was cherished by finding sufficient employment and food for this prolific nation! It would probably double again in half a century. What a vast accession of strength such

number of brave and active men, living almost within the sound of a trumpet, must bring to Great Britain, now said to be decreasing considerably in population! (Hely-Hutchison 1779, pp. 216-217)

Another anonymous pamphlet from 1779 likewise condemned “the narrow policy of former ages” that had raised “a wall of separation” between Britain and Ireland, which “greatly obstructed their mutual prosperity” (*A Comparative View*, 1779, p. 3). There should be no room for jealousy within an empire. “What must the French and Spaniards think of us,” the author inquired, “when they see us neglect one third of our provinces, while our foreign trade is actually threatened with a stagnation in the other two thirds, on account of the excessive dearness of provisions and labour?” (pp. 39-4). The good of the whole community could not be sacrificed because of “prejudices and partial interests.” Allowing the Irish freedom to trade with the American settlements would be an effective way “to advance the strength and grandeur of the British empire in general” (p. 54). “These two islands together, and not Great Britain alone,” the author continued, “ought to be considered as the *metropole*, or mother country of all the colonies” (p. 60). He then concluded invoking a botanic metaphor that recalls Eden’s image of the center-edifice and its wings:

A skillful gardener is attentive to proportion the branches of his trees to the trunks that are to support them, and as Great Britain is daily expanding her branches to a wider extent over America, true policy would dictate to us the propriety of enlarging and strengthening the trunk that is to sustain those branches, by a communication of all commercial advantages to Ireland, and considering both islands but as one (*A Comparative View*, 1779, p. 62)

Even if the pamphlet reinforced the image of a renewed British commercial empire with Britain and Ireland at its core, this imperial project, differently from Tucker, rested firmly on the foundations of colonial domination. This helped put into relief some of the contrasts between British and Irish perspectives on the future of commercial relations between the two kingdoms. Irish claims for a free trade were fair and reasonable, but if they were granted, Ireland “should also be placed nearer to an equality with this island in respect to the public burdens” (p. 18). Wise policy recommended granting Ireland access to British settlements in America and Africa, but in exchange for this “general liberty of trade”, the Irish were expected to contribute to the “support of government, and the public defence of the state” (p. 41). Moreover, vested interests were not an exclusive feature of British political economy: “the interested in Ireland will likewise have their objections to some clauses,” such as abolishing reciprocal customs duties

between the two kingdoms, which “they will alledge, will open a door to the excessive importation of English manufactures into Ireland” (p. 50). But the example afforded by the union between England and Scotland clearly showed the Irish had nothing to fear from removal of the “barriers that obstructed mutual commerce.” Against such interested or narrow views, the author reminded readers “a freedom of trade cannot be granted to the Irish without such a condition, which, if it would bar up some channels of trade to them, would open others equally lucrative, and much more natural” (p. 52).

The message was clear: once Britain and Ireland became united at the helm of a trading colonial empire, the latter could no longer entertain any thoughts of controlling its own trade policy autonomously – a point driven home most forcefully by a deprecating reference to Jonathan Swift as a “pseudo patriot” (p. 6). But the patriot opposition in Ireland saw things in a rather different light. Another anonymous pamphlet published in 1779 sought to vindicate the Irish non-importation associations, while arguing vehemently against the prospect of a union with Britain.⁴ The author presented Ireland as “a country losing her trade, impairing her liberty, and reducing her people to want by an unparalleled propensity to surrender every thing to Great Britain” (*A Letter to the People of Ireland*, 1779, p. 2). It would be foolish to separate commercial dominion from political dominion, since “the mercantile empire, which begins by taking from the connected country her Trade, will soon proceed to make very bold attempts upon her Liberty” (p. 7). In the case of Ireland, this had been proven with the enactment of the Declaratory Act, whose effect was “to degrade the kingdom of Ireland, with *Magna Charta* in her hand, into the state of colony” (p. 56). Now that the non-importation agreements had hurt her at a fragile moment, Britain offered promises of commercial redress. Of all these, the Irish should be especially wary of the project for a union between the two kingdoms.

Some compared the union between Britain and Ireland to the previous union between England and Scotland, but the two cases were nothing alike. “England has incurred the principal part of her debt since that union,” the author explained, “and has lost those Colonies, which were her Dower, when she united to Scotland” (p. 63). Before entering a union, the Irish should consider “what benefits we could give ourselves without it,” and thus estimate “the price for which we sell the liberty of being governed by our own legislature” (pp. 65-66). After a long

⁴ The pamphlet has been variously attributed to two prominent representatives of the patriot opposition in the Irish Commons, Henry Flood and Henry Grattan, though both claims remain doubtful (Morley 2002, pp. 208-209).

time, Ireland finally had the upper hand. “With the dominions which she has lost,” Britain now “forfeits the power of abusing such as remain to her.” She must “court our affection by giving us an interest in her successes, and some safety in her return to power” (pp. 71-72). If they would only continue to “associate in support of our trade, and arm in defence of our Island,” the Irish could finally hope to “become a nation,” and have restored to them the trading privileges that had been usurped by Britain.

The patriot position was stated even more forcefully by the Irish playwright Richard Sheridan, who would soon join the ranks of the British House of Commons, where he played a prominent role opposing Pitt’s commercial propositions a few years later. In a pamphlet styled as a response to Eden, Sheridan used the epigraph to invoke the spirit of Molyneux: “I venture to expose my own weakness, rather than be wanting at this Time to my country.” What Eden failed to grasp, Sheridan argued, was that Irish demands for a free trade concerned the “rights of a people”. But Eden preferred to “avoid *the claim of right*, and choose rather that barren resource, the *bounty* of Great Britain” (Sheridan 1779, p. 10). To Eden’s architectural metaphor, Sheridan skeptically claimed to ignore “where you will find that cement which can make Ireland, being a distinct kingdom, the *wing*, as your expressed it, of Great Britain’s *buildings*” (p. 11). Ireland was not a British province, but it was treated as such every time the British government imposed “arbitrary restrictions on her commercial rights.” Now Britain promised redress, but this was based purely on a calculus of political expediency. Once peace with Spain and France was restored, “Britain, *now* exhausted, will be sufficiently powerful, and then adieu to *fair enquiry* and *candid recollection*; farewell to all the fond hopes and honest expectations of poor deluded Ireland” (p. 14). As to the supposed vagueness and ambiguities of Irish claims for a free trade, Sheridan also had a retort ready at hand:

This grand question of granting a free trade to Ireland, which you have endeavoured to involve in so many difficulties, is contained in the simplest proposition imaginable – LET THE REGULATION OF THE IRISH TRADE BE LEFT TO THE WISDOM AND EQUITY OF THE IRISH LEGISLATURE (Sheridan 1779, pp. 24-25)

“A free trade,” he continued, “is such a trade as *Freemen* ought to possess,” a trade “subject to no restrictions in the country to which it belongs, but such, as the inhabitants of that country, being freemen, have through their representatives, consented should take place” (p. 25). To demand a free trade did not mean contemplating a thorough abolition of controls and

regulations. “Folly itself could never have conceived it to imply,” Sheridan explained, “a trade subject to no restrictions, any more than that a free country should be a country subject to no law” (p. 26). Beyond any disputes about specific trade policies, at stake were the Irish rights, as a free people, to legislate for themselves:

A free trade, such as I have defined it to be, the people of Ireland do not ask of Great Britain as a *favour*, they demand it as a *right*. [...] they do not address the English parliament in their legislative capacity to repeal restrictive laws; they address you as a neighbouring nation, to disavow an *odious usurpation*, equally impolitic and unjust, to disclaim not laws but arbitrary illegal determinations which nothing but your being possessed of a fleet, and our want of one, could have inspired you with the injustice to maintain (Sheridan 1779, pp. 35-36)

Early arguments about the Irish free trade campaign were thus split between two contrasting visions: a project for partial or complete integration of the British Isles as the seat of a reconstructed commercial empire, on one hand; and dreams of a politically emancipated Ireland, on the other, autonomous to decide, on a completely voluntary basis, whether to participate in Britain’s imperial designs. The tension was made clear by the author of the pamphlet defending the Irish non-importation associations from Tucker’s criticism. Even if it looked favorably upon the prospect of a union between the two kingdoms, the pamphlet recognized that, before this came to pass, Britain had “an indubitable right to shut her own ports, and those of all her dependencies against us,” but she had “no right to shut up *our* ports” (*The First Lines of Ireland’s Interest*, 1779, p. 52). In his response to Eden, Sheridan (1779, p. 26) declared free trade was “an expression as definite and determinate as in the nature of language can exist” – but this did not impede the slogan from being freely used to support contentions in both camps. Likewise, the authority of political economists was not readily available to produce convergence around any of these ideological alternatives.

4. Imperial Trade vs Political Autonomy

The trade concessions granted by Britain in early 1780 succeeded in pacifying public agitation in Ireland, but ultimately led to a renewed argument about the long-term preservation of these political conquests. As we saw above, some voices in the Irish patriot camp had been quick to frame demands for a free trade as part of a larger campaign to restore the kingdom’s ancient

rights, which had been usurped by Britain's monopolistic spirit and commercial jealousy. But one of the most significant points yielded to Ireland by the North ministry – unrestricted commercial access to the British colonies – could not be so easily rationalized. The colonial trade was not part of Ireland's rights as an independent kingdom, but rather a privilege attesting to its special place within the British Empire. As a privilege, of course, it could be legitimately withdrawn at any time, following the logic of political expediency. It was thus important, for both sides, to clarify where Ireland stood within the reconstructed imperial networks, and what benefits and obligations this position entailed.

An open letter to North, published in 1780 by a Dublin esquire named Francis Dobbs, accurately anticipated the terms in which subsequent arguments would be framed. After acknowledging North's concessions had initially given occasion to "pretty general satisfaction" in Ireland, Dobbs argued these feelings had changed after "reason had investigated the principles" governing the decision, which was "found to be a matter of EXPEDIENCY, not of right" (Dobbs 1780, pp. 5-6). "The word expedient," he continued, "conveys a thousand things repugnant to the rights of Ireland," which made it imperative to "have the line between rights and favours ascertained" (pp. 9, 11). Dobbs' straightforward answer to this conundrum once again blurred the lines between commercial and constitutional claims: "My Lord, we conceive that we are a free people, and as such entitled to a free trade – We admit your right to shut your ports against us, but we claim a similar power as to you" (p. 11).

Dobbs recognized this reasoning left Ireland in a fragile position with respect to the colonial trade. If legislative autonomy was granted, "Great-Britain of course would have a right to say, you shall not trade with us, but on such conditions as we shall think proper to require." Likewise, "the Colonies would have the same right," which meant "Ireland would have less than the propositions, and the law founded, and to be founded upon them, would give us." But this was a price worth paying, for then "the matter of right would be adjusted," so that "whatever wealth we acquire would be the wealth of Freemen, and could not be taken from us but by own legislature" (p. 20). From this independent position, both kingdoms could then negotiate a commercial treaty admitting Ireland to the benefits of imperial trade, while establishing its duty to help shoulder the Empire's financial burden. In this scenario, "the rights and favours would be distinct," and Ireland could finally enjoy the prospect of "a permanent Free Trade" (p. 21).

A transcription of the minutes from the Irish Parliament debating the British ‘free trade’ resolutions was also circulated in print, resonating some of the same topics. One of the MPs remarked the right of trading to the West Indies was not “precisely the natural right of Ireland,” but argued it was “a very liberal policy, and beneficial to England” (*Authentic Minutes of the Debate in the Irish House of Commons*, 1780, p. 10). In the upper chamber, Lord Mountmorres described British concessions on colonial trade as “a treaty of equal with equal, and friend with friend”. After pondering the benefits Ireland could expect from participating in the imperial trading zone, he concluded: “If, my Lords, these propositions passed into a law will not amount to a Free Trade, satisfying our claim of right, and exceeding our demands, sure I am I know not what will; let sophists define what a Free Trade is, for plain and ordinary men are unequal to the task” (pp. 69-70). Hely-Hutchison gave the resolutions his full approval, while suggesting the few remaining restrictions, on the importation of glass and hops, could be settled by the Irish pledging “never to import those articles from any country but Great Britain.” To explain how this measure “would not be inconsistent with the idea of a ‘Free Trade’,” he quoted from Milton: “law jars not with liberty, but well consists” (p. 32).

But while the general tone was one of approbation, others remained wary of the long-term implications of the proposed settlement. Barry Yelverton, who would soon play a leading role in the repeal of the Declaratory Act, reminded his colleagues that Lord North had “not yet completed that system which is designed for our relief.” Before this came to fruition, Yelverton warned:

I do not think it wise in gentlemen to rise in their places and say, that we have got every thing to which this country is entitled, or which it has any reason to expect. What have we asked unanimously the first day of the session? A Free Trade. The idea I always entertained of a free trade was this: a trade subject to no controul but that of our own Parliament. As the condition of a subject is said to be free, when he is governed either by laws to which either by himself, or by his representative, he gave his consent; so the trade of any country is said to be free when it is regulated only by the legislature of that country. Ireland had a free trade before the legislature of Great Britain interfered; let that interference be withdrawn, and the trade of Ireland will be free again. While, then, [...] there remains a single restriction upon the trade of this country, imposed by another Parliament, I will say the trade of this country cannot be said to be completely emancipated. (*Authentic Minutes of the Debate in the Irish House of Commons*, 1780, p. 35)

Another prominent Irish patriot, Henry Flood, took Yelverton's reasoning to its logical conclusion. "What is a free trade?," he asked, before immediately replying: "a trade to all the countries in the world, subject only to the restraint of your own legislature, or that of the country to which you trade; consequently in Britain, and the British Colonies, subject to the restrictions of the legislature of Great Britain" (p. 49). Irish politicians were thus aware the argument for legislative independence cut both ways, and tried to reconcile their long-standing constitutional concerns with an adequate appreciation for Britain's recent political gestures. But in the popular arena, the rhetorical appeal of radical patriotism was harder to resist.

An anonymous 1780 pamphlet, signed by "a Native of Ireland, and a lover of the British Empire", drew an explicit connection between legislative independence and the security of the free trade settlement. The author explained how "the power, which England claims of binding Ireland by her laws, and that alone, is the source, from whence have proceeded all our distresses" (*The Usurpations of England*, 1780, p. 5). Only the valiant efforts of the Irish parliament, backed by the mighty Volunteers, had finally led the British government to redress its wrongdoings, even if only partially: "Something like a free trade was granted. I say SOMETHING LIKE A FREE TRADE; for there yet remain several odious restraints, imposed by the authority of a British legislature, which serve as living monuments of our slavery and proofs of the power of our masters" (p. 15). The recent concessions could "never amount to a FREE TRADE, so long as the smallest restraints are laid upon our commerce, or so long as that commerce is liable to the future revision of a foreign legislature." Britain was not sincere in her actions, but simply "made a merit of necessity and became liberal from compulsion" (p. 21). Rather than accept the proposed bargain, Ireland should continue pushing for complete legislative independence, since "trade and manufactures never can flourish in this kingdom, until we are emancipated from British authority" (p. 27).

Another anonymous pamphlet, ostensibly debating freedom of the press, likewise denounced North's resolutions. Rather than a gift springing from "an effusion of British liberality," access to the colonial trade was no more than a just compensation for all the damages Ireland had suffered through the ages, which would still "scarcely atone for the ruin of the little commerce we were permitted to enjoy, the penury and distress brought upon innocent Ireland, by the accursed American war" (*Thoughts on News-Papers and a Free Trade*, 1780, p. 16). But these limited concessions were put "upon the unstable footing of *expedience*, without any *faint*

acknowledgement of our national rights” (p. 20). The author then took issue with Eden to present an entangled vision of free trade and legislative independence:

Mr. Eden in his plausible though unmeaning letter on our Irish demands, gives our Parliament credit for their adopting so vague and indefinite a phrase as that of a Free Trade; but begging his pardon, loose as the expression may appear to him, it has a very precise and determinate meaning; in which it was used by those without doors who influence their representatives, and it is presumed by these also; if it has any meaning at all it must signify a trade free from all restrictions, save what the wisdom of our *own* legislature shall impose upon it; or those curbs which it must necessarily meet with *ab extra*, in consequence of the uncontrollable jurisdiction of foreign powers over their own ports. (*Thoughts on News-Papers and a Free Trade*, 1780, p. 21)

Against the privileges of the East India Company, which Britain continued to impose on her sister kingdom, the author conceded it was “for the common benefit of the empire, which is dear to every true Irishman,” that Ireland should supply her needs of East Indian commodities from the British market. But this, the pamphlet added, “should be the result of her *own* wisdom and public spirit, the operation of her *own undictated* laws” (p. 22). A satisfactory settlement would only come with the repeal of Poyning’s Law and “a solemn renunciation of the absurd and ensnaring doctrine of the supremacy and omnipotence of the British legislature” (p. 28). Until then, the author took comfort in the blasting sound every time the Volunteers fired “a volley for the Free Trade” (p. 31).

Poyning’s Law was indeed repealed in 1782, inaugurating a brief era of Irish legislative independence that encompassed the authority to define its own commercial policy. In the meantime, Ireland had experienced firsthand some of the “consequences of the uncontrollable jurisdiction of foreign powers” when the Portuguese refused to recognize its right to trade under the beneficial terms of the Methuen Treaty (Lammey 1986). The episode illustrated the practical limits of the ‘free trade’ settlement obtained by the Irish, a sentiment further reinforced after 1782 as the British continued to use their own legislative autonomy to impose duties on Irish imports. These frustrations served to rekindle the spirit behind the non-importation agreements of 1779, but popular opinion now pressed the Irish parliament to use its recently conquered independence and retaliate the British with protecting duties. Amid the ensuing controversy, which led to Pitt’s commercial propositions of 1785, the authority of political economists was freely used to substantiate claims on all sides. But the wisdom emanating from the “best

commercial writers” did not seem to offer any clear way out of the impasse surrounding Anglo-Irish trade relations.

More than either Smith or Tucker, the political economy work most frequently invoked during the Irish free trade dispute was Sir Matthew Decker’s *Essay on the Causes of the Decline of Foreign Trade* (1744). It was mentioned by Eden (1779, pp. 21-22) as describing “monopolies as a species of trade-tyranny, whereby the many are oppressed for the gain and good pleasure of a few.” Hely-Hutchison (1779, p. 117) likewise relied on Decker to argue the restrictions imposed on Irish woolen exports had mostly benefitted the French, not the British themselves, a point later echoed in a pamphlet by Lord Mountmorres (1785, p. 39). The author of *The First Lines of Ireland’s Interest* (1779, pp. 33, 72) built on Decker to criticize Britain’s “lust of monopoly”, which ultimately undermined its own competitive edge in international markets. A similar argument was advanced in a pamphlet by Sir James Caldwell (1779, pp. 42-43), who called upon Decker to explain how the profusion of monopolies in Britain increased costs of production across the board and made it impossible to compete with the Dutch. In later arguments about Pitt’s commercial propositions, Decker was likewise remembered for his condemnation of the Navigations Acts as a “mere monopoly” that increased the prices of goods imported and exported by Britain (*The Arrangements with Ireland Considered*, 1785, p. 43).

But even if there was near consensus on the deleterious effects of widespread monopolistic practices – reinforced by the writings of Decker, Tucker, Smith, and others – this was still not enough to provide clear guidance on the best commercial policy for Ireland and the British Empire. To see this, one must simply consider the different uses made of Adam Smith’s authority. An anonymous pamphlet published in 1783 to criticize the Irish agitation for protecting duties seems clearly patterned after Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*: it includes a definition of wealth as the “stock of materials [...] necessary and pleasing to the existence of man,” a discussion on the nature of capital, an explanation of prices based upon “labour and skill”, an argument for international specialization based on production costs, and even a defense of the system of natural liberty (*Considerations on the Effects of Protecting Duties*, 1783, pp. 15, 16, 19, 40-41). The author builds on these elements to lambast the “false system of commerce” derived from the “ruinous spirit of monopoly” (p. 7), explaining how trade regulations always “turn the tide of industry out of its natural and fixed channel, into an artificial, and consequently an uncertain one” (pp. 11-12). England had prospered not because of, but despite its restrictive

commercial policies – and as the latter multiplied over time, increasingly eroding its competitive advantages, the kingdom “owed her profit to her power of dictating to so large an empire as she held in subjection” (p. 23). An “open market”, the author concluded, offered a much sounder path to national wealth (p. 27).

The pamphlet comes closest than any to the current understanding of what a Smithian ‘free trade’ argument should look like – and yet, it contains not a single explicit reference to Adam Smith. Conversely, another pamphlet published in 1784 by Richard Griffith, and Irish MP, took the opposite stance to defend the cause of protecting duties. The author professed not to be “a friend to the general principle of monopoly,” which he regarded as “an evil tendency in a commercial state,” but still believed some protection of Irish markets to be “not only expedient, but indispensably necessary to the welfare of this kingdom” (Griffith 1784, pp. 5-6). Griffith disparaged the recent free trade settlement as built on illusions: “The consequence of our free trade on its present foundation will be, that we shall have permission, nay encouragement, to export our raw materials to Great-Britain, while our markets will be glutted and our warehouses filled with the manufactures of that country” (pp. 6-7). He held up the example of Scotland as a cautionary tale, where free trade with England positively obstructed the progress of arts and manufactures – citing the *Wealth of Nations*, Book II, Chapter V to support this point (p. 10).

Another pamphlet published in 1784 strode a more moderate course, chastising England for its “monopolizing arrogance” while calling into question the effectiveness of protecting duties for Ireland. As the “admirable author” of the *Wealth of Nations* had shown, it was never a good policy “to endeavour to make at home” what you could “buy on better terms from foreigners” (*A Letter to the Linen-Manufacturers of Ireland*, 1779, p. 6). But the anonymous author of the pamphlet recognized trade arguments could not be decided based on abstract principles. And here lay the main weakness of the cause for protecting duties: “It is nonsense to talk of protecting duties as a general principle; the utmost that can be said of them is, that *there are cases* in which they may be expedient,” which implied there were also cases “in which they may *not* be expedient” (pp. 7-8). This, in turn, should be “enough to prove that the measure is not of *necessity* a wise one, nor applicable to *all* countries and situations” – in other words, “that you are to examine into the case before you adopt the principles” (p. 9).

The sheer complexity of a system of trade regulations thus provided the ultimate argument in favor of free trade. “I know of no commercial writer who has favoured the principle of directing the course of trade by compulsory duties,” the author explained, “who has given us a code of general rules, by which we should decide in what cases we ought to adopt such a system, and what cases to deviate from it”. Nor should we expect anyone to ever fulfill such a task “with any tolerable precision,” since “every case has its particular circumstances” and “the precision of mind which is requisite to decide universally on the subject, is hardly to be found in human nature” (pp. 10-11). Rather than looking for general and encompassing answers to such intractable problems, one might do better relying on practical and useful maxims: “in my mind, a thousand computations are not worth the plain good sense of a few of Mr. Adam Smith’s principles” (p. 29).

But just like the many articles for the regulation of trade, the usefulness of Smith’s principles only went so far. The commercial resolutions passed by the Irish Commons in 1785 sought to equalize duties between Ireland and Britain, predictably prompting the ire of British manufacturing interests. The revised resolutions finally approved in the British parliament included a fateful clause requiring *ex post* homogenization of commercial policy, which the Irish interpreted as a violation of their legislative independence. One point, however, remained unchanged across different incarnations of the bill. “It is expedient for the general benefit of the British Empire,” legislators on both camps agreed, “that the importation of articles from foreign States should be regulated from time to time, in each kingdom, on such terms as may afford an effectual preference to the importation of similar articles of the growth, produce, or manufacture of the other” (*The Commercial Resolutions of the Irish Parliament, 1785*, p. 12). This surely sounds curious as the policy of a minister committed to the ‘Smithean ideal’ of free trade – but one may wonder if Smith himself would not have considered an imperial preferential trading zone as a reasonable, pragmatic expedient to appease resistance on both sides.

5. Concluding Remarks

In their revised and expanded version, Pitt’s commercial propositions of 1785 were sacrificed on the altar of a coherent imperial trade policy. By requiring the Irish parliament to sanction, using its own legislative authority, all regulations passed by its British counterpart

concerning trade and navigation to different parts of the Empire, the Pitt ministry bluntly advanced over the cherished independence recently obtained by Ireland. The previous few years had made it abundantly clear how the free trade slogan could function as a powerful weapon for political mobilization, but its meaning was not yet sufficiently well-defined to channel argument and action in predictable directions. When forced to choose, the Irish public and political elites stuck to an understanding of free trade as political emancipation, rather than imperial assimilation or liberal cosmopolitanism.

The episode likewise illustrates the role played by political economy in such arguments at the time. Political economy was clearly an important element in the rhetorical strategies employed by the multiple parties, but its usefulness did not involve channeling ready-made doctrinal convictions into clear and decisive verdicts. Rather, the Irish free trade debates confirm the standing of political economy, first and foremost, as a tool for casuistical reasoning, along the lines defined by Walter (2016, 2021). One may have fun speculating about what Adam Smith meant when he suggested British manufacturers should be “properly dealt with beforehand,” but his letter to Dundas conveys a clear understanding that the “plain good sense” of his principles was not enough to swing political opinion. At the height of controversy about the 1785 resolutions, Tucker (1785, pp. v-vi) could speak of his argument for the competitive advantages of rich countries as if it were established wisdom – but this did not impede his authority from being invoked in defense of both unrestrained international competition and the protection of infant manufactures. The writings of political economists were thus searched and picked at the service of different, often conflicting political agendas. To recognize this is not to diminish their intellectual standing, but rather to enhance their value as sources of relevant insight into the concrete problems of their own time.

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