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J. Morrissey, 'Colonial Biopolitics and the Political Economy of Improvement', *Progress in Human Geography*

In 1860, the Irish nationalist writer, John Mitchell, avowed that "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine" (from *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*). The aphorism quickly became an important discursive register in the Irish struggle for independence from Britain through the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seeking to amend Mitchell's memorable maxim fifty years later, however, the Irish socialist republican and revolutionary leader, James Connolly, wrote that "England made the famine by a rigid application of the economic principles that lie at the base of capitalist society" (from *Labour in Irish History*). For Connolly, the colonial administration in Ireland "stood for the rights of property and free competition, and philosophically accepted their consequences upon Ireland". In *Human Incumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*, David Nally goes beyond Connolly's analysis, and presents a brilliant and sophisticated argument outlining how ultimately "the 'rights of the poor' and the 'rights of property' were not accorded the same value". He lays bare what he calls the "transformative forces of colonialism, capitalism and biopolitics", and offers a compelling reading of how the 'virtues of the market' and a hegemonic scripting of the native Irish as 'racially degenerate' were used to initiate disciplinary, regulatory and corrective mechanisms to recast and regenerate contemporary Irish society and sustain a commitment to a colonial economy of improvement.

Nally's thought-provoking book tackles a still vitally important subject. Despite the fact that the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850) has long been academically examined, there has been little or no attempt to analyse the human catastrophe from the perspective of colonial governmentality, population management and political violence. Drawing on an array of political and philosophical writings, from Giorgio Agamben to Hannah Arendt, from Mike Davis to Michel Foucault, Nally argues convincingly that famines are processes which mobilise different theatres of violent action. These include contestations over discursive authority (the capacity to define 'the poor'), institutional power (the capacity to control 'the poor') and politico-legal action (the capacity to compel 'the poor'). Nally shows how, in the most visceral ways, colonial state practices – some of which were designed as famine relief strategies – actually reduced the Irish to what Agamben calls 'bare life' or what Victorian bureaucrats laconically referred to as 'human incumbrances'.

Methodologically, Nally uses a range of archival sources, from British Parliamentary Papers to political pamphlets, from contemporary travelogues to biographies, periodicals and newspapers. He draws especially on the relatively new sub-field of 'Famine Studies' (more or less ignored, he contends, in accounts of the Great Famine in Ireland), and acknowledges in particular the intellectual influence of the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. His intent is furthermore to place importance on comparative analysis (again, not done to any serious extent, he argues, for the Great Irish Famine), especially of the colonial institutional responses to famine across the British Empire. In closing the book, he makes an impassioned plea for the import of analysing historical famines to "better understand

contemporary hunger and food insecurity". For Nally, the persistence of famine today "illustrates how far we are from understanding the legacy of the nineteenth century and how important it is to explain the forces that shape vulnerability".

Because this historical book is written by a geographer, one wonders how widely it will be read in the broader academy and, in particular, by historians. It should form an important reference and prompt for further critical and theoretically informed analyses of the colonial economy of nineteenth-century Ireland – in Irish historical studies more generally – but Nally's explicit use of 'theory' will almost certainly come in for criticism. This would be unfortunate, however, because there is much to learn here. Chapter 1 makes a persuasive argument about why Ireland's history of British colonial expropriation, dispossession and socio-economic transformation must be seen as central to explaining the conditions that consequently contributed to the vulnerability of the native Irish population. Chapter 2 examines the contemporary popular cultural and geopolitical scriptings of Ireland and the Irish that became rooted as powerful "instrumental knowledges". Chapter 3 focuses on one specific colonial governmental mechanism, the Irish Poor Law of 1838, which Nally describes as a "new social experiment to better manage and regulate pauperism". This is followed in chapter 4 with a further consideration of colonial "corrective regulation" in an examination of later administrative famine relief efforts that Nally reads alongside "long-term goals aimed at radically restructuring Irish society". Chapter 5 draws on the contemporary writings of the British historian, social commentator and travel writer, Thomas Carlyle (who travelled across Ireland in 1846 and 1849), to expound the period's competing discourses of 'biopolitics' and 'political economy' and to show how the idea that ultimately won out extolled the "virtues of the market as a disciplinary mechanism capable of restoring moral order". Finally, chapter six concludes with an admirable theorisation of the difficult question of governmental neglect and culpability in the administration of relief measures. Nally makes the case for "a more nuanced understanding of "famineogenic behaviour" – behaviour that aids and abets famine – that draws distinctions between effects of political indifference (a policy of "letting die") and reckless conduct (including utopian plans to radically reconstitute Irish society)".

Nally does not simply critique the interventionary governmental efforts that did take place during the Great Famine (especially the Poor Law workhouses); he reflects too on a number of obvious anti-scarcity measures that were not initiated, such as "embargoes on the exportation of food, proscriptions against the use of grain for distilling alcohol, the slaughter of livestock for home consumption, wage adjustments to meet the rising costs of provisions, and duty free import of rations". That none of these programmes ever happened betrays the extent of contemporary doctrinaire adherence to "the laws of political economy", but it also raises the question of 'culpable governmental neglect'. Successfully eschewing the radical nationalist position of reading the famine as genocide, Nally does not shirk from theorising the question of culpability and how the Great Irish Famine had, in fact, a regulatory 'function' that divulges a range of contemporary colonial concerns of biopolitical management and socio-economic correction. He also sustains a compelling argument throughout to demonstrate how the famine's genesis must be carefully historicised. For Nally,

a long colonial history of plantation and discursive and material violence against an indigenous population pushed them to the very margins of life – to recurrent crises of subsistence and poverty and to a position where they were seen as racially degenerate “redundant labour”, and ultimately “unproductive life”.