

White on “the Irish Factor” in Jevon’s Statistics: a Rebuttal

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I Michael White’s case against Jevons is made more difficult to follow because his charges and evidence are set out in no discernible order; in fact, less in a chronological order than in a reverse chronological order, though not consistently in the latter. I would add that, with one or two exceptions, I am not discussing any evidence from Jevon’s writings not mentioned by White. I am maintaining that (1) his quotations fail seriously to justify his charges; and that (2) he fails to mention, or quote, other passages from the writings in his bibliography which undermine or destroy his charges.

II Jevon’s interest in the social problems of towns and cities was probably first aroused when he was a teenager in his native Liverpool - (which had one of the largest Irish immigrant populations in the country). As his grand daughter, Rosamund Könekamp, has put it: ‘In Jevon’s youth poverty and its attendant problems were worse in Liverpool than in any other city, largely because of the rapid expansion of the port and the immigration of vast numbers of the poor of Ireland and Wales’ (Black, ed., 1973-81, vol. I, p. 16). Before developing his economic ideas Jevons had become seriously interested in what he called the ‘Science of Towns’, beginning with London and Sydney. He was fired by an ambition to reduce poverty and the squalor of the slums.

Two economists, Professors Walsh and Gram, - (who, incidentally, radically reject neoclassical economic theory) - have maintained: ‘The similarity of the tone of Jevon’s social observation with certain great passages in *Capital* and with Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Classes in Britain* is so striking that one could sandwich a passage from Jevons between a couple of those of Marx or Engels without any sharp change of feeling or style being obvious’ (1980, p. 125). Up to a point we agree with this rather excessively broad minded judgement, but must insist on entering the massive reservation that - as we shall show - nowhere does Jevons indulge in the kind of heavily ‘racist’ abuse which characterises some of the writings of Engels and Marx, in particular, in the case of Engels, with regard to the Irish.

III Jevon’s first mention, of any significance, of ‘the Irish factor’ occurs in his wide ranging Presidential Address to the British Association in 1870. This mention is also much the lengthiest of Jevon’s discussions of Irish problems listed in White’s bibliography, consisting, as it does, of a full 3 1/4 pages - (3/4 of a page in the Address plus the 2 1/2 page Appendix B). Jevons begins by expressing surprise ‘that more attention has not been drawn to the probable influence of a poor Irish population in raising the death rate’ (p. 320). After summarising his statistical findings, which purport and seem to indicate, very broadly, that the cities and towns with the highest mortality rates have the largest percentage of Irish residents, Jevons concludes: ‘If, after further investigation, this suggestion should be found to explain the high and mysterious mortality of many towns, it will point out exactly where most attention is needed’ (p. 320, italics added). Jevon’s Appendix B, “On the Connection between the Irish Population and the Rate of Mortality in Towns”, set out the statistical tables on which his ‘suggestion’ rests of a ‘probable influence’ - (ie. obviously not the only influence) - on mortality rates, which, as he notes, required ‘further investigation’. Incidentally, Jevons noted Sheffield as an exception to his tentative generalisation.

IV In the following year, 1871, Jevon's suggestions, and his call for 'further investigation,' met with a brief, six page criticism from T. R. Wilkinson, in a paper to the Manchester Statistical Society. Wilkinson was quite justified in remarking that 'the question is decidedly more complex than appears at first sight,' and his criticism is well reasoned as far as it goes. But White's descriptions of Wilkinson's paper as 'devastating', and 'a refutation', are widely exaggerated, and simple exemplify White's own uncontrolled prejudices. The actual new material which Wilkinson produced related to a community called Knott Mill, where the death rate of the English seems to have been higher than that of the Irish. But the figures are based on much too small a population of some 70-80 families, to be highly significant. In fact, Wilkinson pointed to a possible compromise between his own view and the suggestion of Jevons by concluding that 'it may be true that the Irish element aggravates some of the conditions because it is an influx of that class (the poor and the ignorant) which, in all nationalities suffers and is a constant and prolific source of anxiety and loss to the community in which it exists' (p. 54). This passage, needless to say, is not quoted by White, because it recognises the probability of Jevon's assumption that the Irish immigrants were very much poorer and more prone to drink excessively than the poorest of the native population, which had certainly been the view of Engels.¹ The obvious outcome, or state of play, after the exchange between Jevons and Wilkinson, for anyone not excessively prejudiced, was that there was no conclusive, empirical-statistical evidence, *either* for Jevon's 'suggestion' - (which, as he emphasised, required 'further investigation') - *or* for Wilkinson's 'opposite opinion', as Jevons described it (1882, p. 39n).

V Two very brief fleeting mentions by Jevons of the, or an, Irish factor, or problem, dating from 1874 and 1875, may be noted at this point. First, in a letter to his brother of 1874 Jevons reported that he had discovered some data in the U.S. census statistics, 'quite countenancing my theory', regarding the proportion of Irish deaths in states with higher mortality rates (v. Black, 1973-81, vol. IV, p. 55). *Secondly*, according to the report of a college lecture of 1875, Jevons remarked that 'the way the Irish live, especially in some of our large towns, and in some parts of their own country, makes it a priori probably that they die fast' (Black, 1973-81, vol. VI, p. 59). Presumably, the context of this generalisation made it clear that Jevons was referring to the numerous very poor Irish, whether in England or Ireland. (He was, in fact, following, in *much* milder terms, the conclusions of Engels, of two three-decades previously, regarding the district of Manchester known as 'Little Ireland', in *The Condition of the Working Class in Britain* (1845 and 1958).²

VI In 1879 Jevons apparently drew up a circular letter, dated April 12th, of which a copy, or printed draft, has been unearthed by White (v. 1993, pp. 83-4). Jevons stated his need for information regarding the nationality of those 'apprehended for drunkenness', in particular regarding the Irish. He explained that he was seeking 'to elucidate, if possible, the extraordinary and at present unaccountable differences which exist between the apparent rate of drunkenness in different cities, towns, and counties' (White, 1993, pp. 93-4). Jevons made it quite clear that his research program was *to test out a hypothesis*, which, *if established* (italics added), would 'remove false inferences': *that is, Jevons explicitly did not claim his hypothesis as 'established'*. Jevons concludes his circular by remarking that 'any facts or hints which you could give me on this point would be of great value' (p. 84, italics added). Of course, Jevons was seeking information relevant to his hypothesis, but, quite obviously - (except to White) - the 'any facts or hints', or answers, to his enquires, if he had received any, might have been *either* in favour, and supportive, *or* damaging or opposed. White ambiguously and misleadingly describes Jevon's hypothesis as a 'claim', which fudges the vital difference between an *unestablished*, working hypothesis - as Jevons made clear his theory was - and as a hypothesis which was 'claimed' to be 'established', - which is what Jevons explicitly *disclaimed*.

In the same year, 1879, Jevons made a half page contribution, originally oral, to a discussion of a paper, 'On the Celtic Language in the British Isles: a Statistical Survey'. In this paragraph Jevons called attention, briefly and rather vaguely, to the increasing mixing of populations resulting from

the migrations of Irish to England and English to Australia. He is charged by White with 'suggesting that the working class in England could undergo a genetic deterioration due to a change in its racial composition' (p. 81). The term 'genetic deterioration' is the invention, or 'suggestion' of White. Moreover, Jevons again made it clear that he was concerned simply with an unestablished hypothesis by noting that the variations in rates of mortality 'could not be at present explained' (p. 640).

VII Finally come two articles in *The Contemporary Review*. In 1880 appeared 'Experimental Legislation and the Drink Trade', the first 6 of the 16 pages of which were devoted to Jevon's concept of 'Experimental Legislation', which follows closely on his ideas about empirical, scientific method. Jevons insists that legislators should proceed 'piece-meal' - (in Sir Karl Popper's phrase) - or by small, single steps, which, like the theories from which they are derived, should be, as far as possible, tested out, one at a time, empirically and statistically.

Apart from a passing mention of 'Anglo-Irish' towns (p. 187), there is only one passage in this paper which mentions the Irish. Calling for 'a small and progressive experiment' in land reform in Ireland, introducing peasant proprietorship, Jevons continues: "'Earth hunger" is a very potent passion, and I believe it is that from which the Irish people are really suffering. Bread and bacon are not the only good things an Irish peasant might aspire to; a place to call his own, a share of the air and sunlight of his native isle, and a land-bank in which to save up the strokes of his pick and spade, might work wonders' (1880, p. 191). Of course these sentences, the only significant mention of the Irish in the paper he cites, are not quoted by White, because they are fatal to his purpose of vilifying Jevons as one guilty of 'racist abuse'. This passage makes it quite clear that, in Jevon's view, the sufferings of the Irish were due to alterable, environmental conditions, and not entirely to genetic factors. In fact, in his correspondence with a clergyman friend, whom he visited in Ireland - (not of course quoted by White) - Jevons repeatedly demonstrated his good will towards the Irish, supporting conciliation and Gladstone's measure of land reform, and opposing coercion (v Black, Vol. V, pp. 151, 179, 189, 197 etc).³ Such passages in his letters, and the passage in his paper of 1880, destroy the repeated insinuations of White that Jevons regarded the Irish as 'uncivilised and downright barbarous' (p. 79); or as a 'subhuman species' (p. 80.); or that he indulged in 'racist abuse' (1993 (b), p. 23); or that 'racism pervades his work, including *The Theory of Political Economy*, (p. 82). White supports this latter charge only by the citation of a, so far, unpublished typescript of his own - an unusual and unconvincing scholarly ploy.

VIII Finally, a second paper in *The Contemporary Review*, 'Married Women in Factories' (1882), though containing no direct mention of any Irish problem, indirectly refers to Wilkinson's 'opposite opinion' (of 1871) to that of Jevons, regarding mortality rates. He repeats that he is 'quite satisfied' with his hypothesis regarding 'the excessive mortality of such towns as Liverpool and Salford' (1882, p. 39). For since, in spite of what White describes as 'the lengths to which Jevons went to obtain statistics' (p. 80), there had been no significant new, additional statistical information forthcoming on the problem, there had, therefore, been no substantial reason for Jevons to withdraw his original, suggested and unestablished, working hypothesis or belief.

IX So much for what White quotes, and, more significantly, fails to quote. I turn now to his opening tirade regarding a 'stereotype' of the Irish, which White alleges was 'both reflected and contributed to' by Jevons (p.79). According to White, the Irish immigration into London, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester brought angry protests from various sections of society: 'The Irish Celts ... were viewed as idle, dissolute, violent, intemperate, dirty, garrulous and emotionally unstable. In particular, the Irish were "uncivilised ... [and] downright barbarous" since they "did not know the difference between dirt and cleanliness" (p.79), quoting Curtis, 1968, pp. 19 and 57). This 'stereotype' consists of some 10 adjectives or adjectival phrases, most, but not all of them severely pejorative, though one or two - eg. 'intemperate' and 'garrulous') - might be regarded as harmless, or scarcely unfavourable. The fact is, however, that, on the basis of Jevon's

own words, he contributed to only a single one out of the ten adjectival components of this 'stereotype' cited by White, and that was the comparatively harmless adjective 'intemperate'. Nor does, or can, White offer a single quotation from Jevons confirming his use of any other of the nine adjectives or phrases White quotes, or employing anything remotely resembling the language White ascribes to Jevons. White's allegation that Jevons 'reflected' such a stereotype is, therefore, about 95% false.

Certainly, however, this kind of stereotype had been propagated comparatively early, and in the most savage terms by a well known economist. But this economist was not a pioneer neo-classical and originator of - (what Maurice Dobb called) - 'the Jevonian Revolution', but was the great original, inspirer of Marxian economics, and life long supporter and subscriber of the Prophet, Karl Marx: ie. Friedrich Engels. For, in the eighteen-forties, Engels had described the flood of Irish immigrants into Manchester as a kind of underclass: 'uncouth, improvident, and addicted to drink', - and much else besides, - referring to the area of Manchester known as 'Little Ireland', which was 'mostly Irish in population', as 'the most disgusting spot of all' in Manchester slums (1958, p. 71). Naturally White does not refer to the well known work of Engels, - (though the precise reason for his omission is not clear).⁴

X A contemporary, late twentieth century parallel may be drawn with the serious problem of drunkenness in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century. Though this twentieth century problem is overwhelmingly more serious, the parallel is suggestive. In the decade, roughly, of the nineteen-eighties, in the USA, a huge rise in the murder-rate occurred, which was demonstrated, by reasonably satisfactory statistics, to be due, to a large extent, to a huge rise in murders by, and of, one particular age group, in a particular minority community. Leaders of this minority community have broadly accepted the statistics, so that policy measures, guided by these figures can be specifically targeted. Here is a close parallel with what Jevons was aiming at, though admittedly he was very over-optimistic in hoping that the adequate statistics, which he went to such lengths to obtain, would be forthcoming. But if all attempts to arrive at adequate, comparative, medical, social, or crime statistics, relating to different sections of diverse, multi-ethnic, or multicultural, societies, are to be met with obscurantist shrieks of 'racism', - (even when couched in the extremely moderate terms employed by Jevons) - then the application of social research to the remedying of social problems is rendered largely impossible. It is fair to add, also, that Jevons, from the start of his tragically abbreviated career, obviously felt strongly the appalling costs and sufferings resulting from some of the social maladies which he had, from boyhood in Liverpool, observed around him. He was less patient than many late-twentieth-century academic 'professionals' in waiting for all the statistical material, which might be relevant, to become fully available, before framing hypotheses which might, after adequate testing, help to target remedies, though he himself went to the most strenuous lengths to obtain relevant empirical and statistical information.

XI In 1982 White announced his discovery of a Jevonian project to derive 'iron laws of distribution' as a justification for an extreme *laissez faire* doctrine regarding the role of the state. White claimed that Jevons launched such a program during his sojourn in Australia, and that he held to such a project for much, or all, of his subsequent career. Challenged to produce evidence for this new view, White replied that detailed citation and explanation 'will, however, be postponed to another occasion' (1984, p. 71). A decade or more later, however, White seems to have switched completely the direction of his ideological vendetta towards scratching around for fragments of political 'incorrectness' and 'racism'. It is not clear whether White is continuing to emphasise the significance of Jevon's work in Australia for his entire *oeuvre* - (as against what he very questionably described as 'the conventional view' of its unimportance) - by claiming that what he calls Jevon's 'racism' was conceived during his sojourn 'down under', or as a result of his experiences there.

XII Some conclusions may be summarised as follows:

- 1 A study of attitudes among nineteenth-century economists to national, ethnic, or 'racial' groups, including the Irish - (and British) - might perhaps prove of interest, if undertaken with some breadth of historical understanding and empathy regarding earlier attitudes, terminology, and presuppositions - (an understanding which is hardly manifested in White's laughable rebuke of Jevons for his 'marked insensitivity' in referring to 'Mrs Jacob Bright' in those terms, when it is reasonable to suppose that she would have been surprised, or even possibly embarrassed, at being addressed in any other mode).
- 2 Especially in his later years, Jevons kept up simultaneously an extraordinary large and wide ranging program of research projects. He did not concentrate simply on one or two questions at a time and dispose of these before proceeding to the next. Between 1870 and his death in 1882, between which his fragmentary references to an 'Irish factor' were produced, Jevons brought out such major volumes as *The Theory of Political Economy*, *The Principles of Science*, and *Money, and the Mechanism of Exchange*; as well as a number of important papers such as 'The Future of Political Economy'. At his sudden, so premature death, he left a large number of unfinished projects of great or lesser importance. He left unfinished a treatise on religion and science, an edition of Adam Smith, and his *Principles of Economics* a major treatise. It is impossible to say of any particular project, either the greatest or the smallest and briefest - (such as his inquiry into the poverty of Irish immigrants) - just how he would have brought it to a conclusion, or to guess what surprising directions his views might have taken.
- 3 In a paper of 1982 I described how Jevon's missionary ambition 'to be powerfully good', in contributing to social and economic reform, was balanced by three vital checks: (a) from a genuine, strenuous concern to find out empirically about the lives of the poor, and of those to whom he was aspiring to do good; (b) an insistence on the discipline of empirical testing, as far as possible; and (c) a fundamental critical fallibilism regarding scientific theories (v. Hutchison, 1982, p. 8). Jevon's ideas were developed at length in his *Principles of Science* (1874), and briefly also in the opening pages of his article, already referred to, on 'Experimental Legislation'. Nothing in, or arising out of, White's 'Note' suggests any need for any serious revision of my remarks of 1982.

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Notes

- 1 As Engels put it: 'This factor - [ie. the immigration of the Irish] - continually operates to depress the standard of life of the working classes to lower levels' (1958, p. 103). Engels, emphasising how the Irish compete with English labour in all markets, continued: 'It has been observed that the arrival of the Irish has degraded the English worker, lowering both the standard of living and the level of their behaviour' (p. 139). Moreover, Engels noted: 'As Dr Kay has pointed out, the Irish have discovered "what is the minimum of the means of life upon which existence may be prolonged" and this secret has been taught the labourers of this country by the Irish' (p. 105). 'The habits and the intellectual and moral attitudes - indeed the whole character - of the working class have been strongly influenced by the Irish immigrants' (p. 107). Engels even opined that 'the growing habit of going about barefoot in England has been introduced by Irish immigrants' (p. 80). On the other hand, Engels was sometimes prepared to recognise environmental factors: 'Everything combines to drive the Irishman to drink' (p. 106); 'How can society complain when the Irishman does, in fact, become a habitual drunkard?' (p. 107). Indeed, Engels and Marx came to regard the immigrant Irish underclass as helping forward the final, revolutionary destruction of English 'capitalism', which they, and their generations of disciples, decade after decade, so erroneously predicted in Britain.

Engels's views were, of course, based on close-up observation, for some two years, in Manchester. His work of 1845 provided the starting point and platform for the whole, original, Marxian theoretical system. The original Marxian model was, largely, Manchester in the 1840s (v. Hutchison, 1981, pp. 6ff). It may well be that it was the immigration, of what Engels regarded as a kind of Irish underclass, which sparked off the central Marxian idea - (or, rather fallacy) - of the immiseration thesis. It seems that much of the *factual* component of Engels's work of 1845 may amount - (though *some* not) - to a reasonable approximation. It is much more in their dubious and dogmatic theoretical superstructure that the two prophets went so disastrously astray,

especially with regard to Marx's labour theory of value, which proved so useless in the practice, and collapse, of Marxian economic planning, - while the 'capitalist' economies, roughly and imperfectly guided by *the kind of* value and price theory pioneered by Jevons, still manage to struggle forward.

- 2 Engels described the Irish as 'debased alike by penury, want of economy and dissolute habits', (1958, p. 77); 'They are uncouth, improvident, and addicted to drink' (p. 104). The physical characteristics of the Irish make them 'easily recognisable': 'One may depend upon seeing many Celtic faces which are quite different from those of the Anglo-Saxon population' (p. 105). 'The Irish have also brought with them filth and intemperance' (p. 105) 'The Irishman eats and sleeps with his pig' ... (p. 80).
- 3 Rev. Harold Rylett (1851-1936) had been a pupil of Jevons at Owens College. He became a Unitarian Minister and from 1879 to 1884 he served at Moneyrea, County Down. According to Black (IV, p. 241 n.), Rylett 'took an active interest in Irish politics: he was strongly Liberal, favouring the Nationalist and Land League movements, and in 1881 stood unsuccessfully for one of the Co Tyrone divisions'. Though not, apparently, earlier accepting Rylett's more radical views, in his last letter, of July 2nd, 1882, Jevons came to agree much more closely with Rylett (v. V, pp. 196-7). White, needless to add, leaves Jevon's friendship and correspondence with Rylett carefully and completely unmentioned.
- 4 Though Engels was more inclined than Marx to indulge in what would be widely condemned today as 'racist' discourse, Marx certainly kept his end up, as when he described his fellow socialist Lassalle as the 'Jewish Nigger' (v. Carr, 1938, pp. 157ff). As Walker Conner (1984) has observed, Marx and Engels expressed quite Hitlerian views on the smaller, Slav nations of Eastern Europe, such as: 'the Slavic barbarians ... those petty bull-headed nations will be destroyed so that nothing is left of them but their names' (1984, p. 15). Conner continues: 'Entire nations (particularly the non-Polish and non-Russian Slavic peoples) were described as unredeemable ethnic trash, the ruins of people, whose chief mission ... is to perish in the revolutionary holocaust' (v. Conner, 1984, p. 15; quoting from Blackstock and Hoselitz, eds., 1952, p. 67). Conner goes on to emphasise 'the genetic determinism which permeates these and many passages by Engels' (p. 16). Certainly, a study of ideas as to 'genetic determinism' in ethnic or national groups, in the writings of nineteenth century economists, might yield much striking material. Jevon's minuscule contribution, however, would pale into insignificance, as a very trivial footnote beside the monstrous outpourings of Engels and Marx.

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