

*Patronage, Tradition and Modernisation:
The case of the Irish "Gombeenman"*

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As part of a general movement toward the study of complex societies in political anthropology, the last few years has witnessed a proliferation of empirical studies in patron-client ties. Most of this literature has been essentially descriptive in character, but more recently attempts have been made to analyse the problem of the relation between transitions in these ties and the kinds of structural change implied by the notion of increasing social "complexity". The concepts employed in these analyses have by and large been those of neo-Weberian "modernisation" theory. Patronage as a phenomenon within complex societies has been ascribed to the survival in them of residual "traditional" elements, while its displacement, first by the phenomenon of "brokerage", and later by horizontally-articulated forms of political mobilisation, has been ascribed to the eradication of these elements by the modernisation process. Through the examination of the rise and fall of Irish rural society's most characteristic occupant of the role of patron—the "gombeenman"—this paper attempts to assess the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis, and more generally, the theoretical problems raised by efforts to accommodate the typical categories of political anthropology with dynamic theories of social change.

The exposition and argument are in four sections. Firstly, there is a discussion of the existing literature on patronage and brokerage within political anthropology. Secondly, three case-studies are presented of patronage and brokerage in historical and contemporary Irish society. Thirdly, the adequacy of existing formulations of the problem of the relation between patronage, tradition and modernisation is examined in their light. Lastly, the weaknesses of existing formulations are discussed in relation to the status of the concepts they embody.

I

The first appearance of the terms "patronage" and "clientage" within a systematic description of structured social relations appears in Weber's ideal type of patrimonialism, to be found in *The Religion of China* and elsewhere. The notions were developed more extensively in Marc Bloch's monumental *Feudal Society*, in which the "growth of ties of personal dependence" is seen as the key determinant in the rise of feudalism. The social relations denoted by these notions differ little as employed by Weber, Bloch or modern political anthropologists. *Patronage* denotes a relation of personal dependence and subordination in which mutual exchanges take place between a *patron*, who constitutes the source of one side of the exchanges, and a *client*, who constitutes the source of the other. The dependence and subordination of the client is constituted through the fact that in the relation it is always the patron, by virtue of superior resources of one kind or another, who determines the currency and volume of the exchange.¹ Within political anthropology the exploration of these relations was pioneered by Barnes, Mitchell and Gluckman in their article on the African headman, and advanced and adumbrated by Fallers, Mitchell and Fortes with reference to Africa, by Foster and Wolf with reference to Mexico, Geertz and Wertheim to South-east Asia, Boissevain to the Mediterranean and Barth and Paine with reference to the Norwegian and Canadian arctics.

In the process of the incorporation of these terms into anthropology, another notion has been added. This is that of *brokerage*, which commonly denotes the role of the middleman who purveys goods, services and values on behalf of the patron and in return purveys the reciprocal payments specified by the exchange back to him, while mediating both transactions in more or less complex ways. We wish now to explain how these notions "work" within political anthropology, that is, what theories specify the forms and limits of their applicability. Apart from structural anthropology and American formal ethnography, the dominant theoretical position internationally in anthropology today is that of *transactionalism*. Those who hold this position argue that since integrated encapsulated societies no longer form the object of anthropology, the functionalist frame of reference designed to comprehend them should be discarded in favour of an approach which studies the processes of strategic negotiation whereby new social relations between members of ex-encapsulated societies and the larger society are forged. Characteristically, the model of the economic market and its bargaining processes has been transposed to this study, on the grounds that like the new conjuncture studied by anthropology, it combines both the actions of free agents and certain tendencies to regularity in the same. Hence the interest of political anthropology in the following kinds of relations: patronage and brokerage;

1. This definition is derived from R. Paine's essay, "A Theory of Patronage and Brokerage" in Paine, R. (ed.), *Patrons and Brokers in the East Arctic*, St. John's Newfoundland: Social & Economic Papers, 1971. This text includes a comprehensive bibliography on the subject.

factionalism; friendship-cliques; individual-centred coalitions; social networks, and so on.

Within this general tendency, two main positions may be identified. The first, which we shall call "strong" transactionalism, posits that political anthropology has begun to discover certain universal forms of social relations characteristic of all societies up to and including capitalism and socialism. The project of anthropology should therefore be a strictly comparative one, analysing the different content of these relations in terms of the availability of negotiating strategies. The second, which we shall call "weak" transactionalism, posits that these relations, while identifiably recurring throughout history, are only especially significant in the periods immediately preceding and during the process of incorporation of previously encapsulated societies into "complex" societies. As "modernisation" comes slowly to be diffused, they lose most of their significance. This position, which we shall mainly be concerned with, incorporates elements of Weber's account of economic and social development.

These positions are duplicated with respect to the question of patronage and brokerage. According to advocates of "strong" transactionalism, patronage and brokerage are found in fairly constant proportions in all societies, differing in significance and content only in so far as individual members of the society successfully adopt them as strategic roles.² According to the "weaker" version of transactionalism on the other hand, while patronage and brokerage are to be found in all societies, certain structural principles exist which make them more or less common historically. Summarising an extensive literature implying this thesis, Weingrod formulates the following propositions:

1. Patron-client ties are found mostly in three distinct historical periods: within feudalism, at the boundaries of the dual economy in transitional societies, and at the boundaries of "local" and "national" political arenas in transitional societies.
2. The structural principles giving rise to patronage and brokerage are feudalism (patronage proper) and the emergence of a regulative state in transitional

2. In an article in the journal *Sociologisches Gids*, Boissevain, a representative "strong" transactionalist, remarks: "Patronage must be studied as a universal phenomenon . . . the relevant questions are not where and why patronage occurs (since patronage occurs in all societies) but how patrons and clients operate their roles and what other factors influence their operation. Given that this is a universal phenomenon, our object should be to arrive at meaningful hypotheses regarding the relation between strategy, resources and environment." "Patrons as Brokers", *SG* Vol. 16, 1968.

Even more sharply, Paine concludes his analysis of patronage with the argument that not only is patronage a universal phenomenon, but that in determining who occupies patronage roles, consideration of status and rank are subordinate in comparison with particular people's "general strategic skills" (Paine, R., *ibid.*). This position would also be occupied by Bailey, who attempts to apply Game Theory to the study of these relations (in *Strategems and Spoils*, Oxford (Blackwell), 1968).

societies in which authority remains dispersed and state activity fairly circumscribed (brokerage).

3. The structural principles giving rise to the *decline* of patronage and brokerage are this transition to the regulative state (displacement of patronage by brokerage) and the emergence of a reforming state with a large bureaucratic apparatus (erosion of brokerage and transition to supra-local politics).³

On the one hand, patronage, brokerage and clientage as universal societal attributes; on the other, these roles as historically conditioned social relationships rising in the period of feudalism (conceptualised as political decentralisation) and slowly disappearing with the advent of bureaucratisation and industrialisation. Almost all the literature on patronage implies one or other of these perspectives.

Before passing directly to our case-studies of the operation of these relations in Irish rural society, it would be as well to review the claims which have been made by students of Irish political sociology for the explanatory merit of these perspectives in relation to this particular region. A pioneering work in this respect was Chubb's *The Government and Politics of Ireland*. This work is centrally devoted to a comprehensive description of Irish politico-legal institutions, but it also brings together a number of sociological themes in a discussion of various "anomalies" in Irish politics. These include: the character of both the major parties as vertically-integrated inter-class alliances; a lack of serious ideological differences between these parties; a comprehensive localism in national politics; a statistically-attested extremely low degree of public confidence in the ability of ordinary citizens to collectively influence local or national governmental action; an absence of interest-groups or public campaigns in national politics; the dominance of national and local politics by the personal clienteles of politicians; and the constant recurrence of corrupt practices in local government. At different places in his work, Chubb effectually ascribes all these anomalies ("anomalies" for a western European democracy) to the operation of patronage and brokerage. Indeed, according to Chubb, the role of politicians and political parties in Ireland is essentially the articulation of these relations. Chubb sees this as a consequence of residual "tradition":

For generations, Irish people saw that to get the benefits that public authorities bestow, the help of a man with connections and influence was necessary. All that democracy has meant is that such a man has been laid on officially, as it were, and is now no longer a master but a servant. (p. 76)

Chubb's analysis was carried further by Bax in an article which appeared two years later.⁴ Like Chubb, Bax claims that the dominance of patronage and

3. Weingrod, A., "Patrons, Patronage and Political Parties", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, 1967.

4. Bax, M., "Patronage Irish Style: Politicians as Brokers", *SG*, Vol. 18, 1970.

brokerage underlies Ireland's political anomalies. More than that, it has been the means by which the vertical integration of Irish society has been secured for most of the last hundred years. Until independence (1922) says Bax, landlords acted as the principal patrons and brokers; since the emergence of an independent reformist and interventionist state apparatus, they have been displaced by professional politicians mediating between the former clients of the now powerless landlords and the new state bureaucracy. The success of the latter in establishing themselves has been based upon the scarcity-value of the social benefits they had privileged access to, in the endemic "personalism" and "localism" of the "Irish character", and in the sterility of the ideological disputes of the period. These causes were heightened by the introduction by the new regime of the Proportional Representation electoral system with multi-member constituencies. This forced parties to put up a number of candidates for each area, and candidates to organise a personal as well as political following. According to Bax and subsequent literature inspired by his research, brokerage is now completely endemic in Ireland, and infuses every social transaction.⁵ It is time now to examine how much the perspectives, outlined in theoretical and operational terms, *can* actually explain about Irish rural social relations, in the light of our three case-studies. These cover respectively patronage before independence on the western seaboard; patronage today on the western seaboard; and patronage today in a "modernised" rural area of eastern Ireland.

(i) *Patronage in the Pre-Independence Era: the Rule of the "Gombeenman"*

Although both Chubb and Bax identify landlords as the principal occupants of the role of patron prior to Independence, most of the evidence suggests that their political, moral and economic influence declined rapidly from the famine onwards.⁶ By the 1880s landlord power had passed in many places to another source—the "gombeenman". "Gombeen" is a corruption of the Irish word (*gaimbin*) for interest, and the term was originally coined to describe the activities of rural moneylenders in pre-Famine Ireland. After the Famine the term became transposed to shopkeepers either practising usury as a sideline, or integrating orthodox commercial and usurious relations of exploitation. Such shopkeepers were a common phenomenon everywhere in the early capitalist world, but in certain areas of Ireland, particularly the western seaboard, the "gombeenman" was not simply one entrepreneur among many, but the effectual ruler of large tracts of

5. In the short time since its publication, Bax's work has provided a focus for discussion both of the typical careers of recent recruits to the Irish political elite (Cohan, A.: *The Irish Political Elite*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971) and of the basis of the political successes of the Fianna Fáil party (Manning, M., *Irish Political Parties*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971).

6. By the 1880s, with the implementation of the various Land Acts enabling tenant purchase, Irish landlords were almost always either absentees without local moral or political influence (except in Ulster); or were capitalist desmesne farmers employing wage-labourers and exercising influence only over them and the tenant farmers directly dependent on them. See Lee, J., *The Modernization of Irish Society 1848-1918*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973.

country and hundreds of "subjects". This status was frequently reflected in their acquisition of the title "king" or "lord".⁷

It is proposed to review the patronage functions of the gombeenman under the following headings: economic, political and ideological. The data for this study are derived from period "exposure" novels, and from official and unofficial contemporary accounts of Irish agrarian social relations.⁸

Economic Patronage: The gombeenman of the period 1870-1930 typically exercised economic patronage through credit retailing in combination with moneylending. In order to secure a dependent clientele he made cash loans and credit freely available to small farmers, ostensibly without reference to security. In return, he both charged interest and insisted that his debtors bought goods only from his store. Having established dependence, he would then charge inflated retail prices to his customer in order both to secure as much profit as possible and to keep the customer falling further into debt. This secured tied clientele for both purchasing and retailing. It enabled the gombeenman to attain a monopoly in marketing the produce of clients, and further enabled him not only to pay for them below market price but to make a second profit by insisting that the produce be bartered for shop-goods. The gombeenman was also enabled to create a bonded labour-market, the most famed example of which was that for the knitting industry in west Donegal.⁹

Another means of the creation of bonds of monopolistic economic dependence was the "trust auction". Under this system prospective clients in need of ready cash would sell their stock to each other through the gombeenman (acting in the

7. The transposition of the title "king" is especially significant, since it was traditionally reserved in Irish-speaking areas to designate the senior living male in the lineage of the deposed Celtic landholder. Gaining this title reflected displacing the personage occupying this role within the local-level status hierarchy.

8. The novels in question are the works of the Donegal author Patrick MacGill (*The Rat Pit*, London: Herbert Jenkins, 1915; *Children of the Dead End*, London: Herbert Jenkins, 1914); and the Galway novelist Liam O'Flaherty (particularly *House of Gold*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1929). The most important unofficial descriptions of the economy of this region during the period are to be found in the biographical works of W. L. Micks (*History of the Congested Districts Board*, Dublin: Maunsell, 1925) and Patrick Gallagher, the founder of the co-operative movement in Donegal (*My Life, or Paddy the Cope*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1936). The principal official reports dealing directly or indirectly with Irish rural social relations in this period are *Royal Commission on Labour* (Vol. 4, *Agricultural Labour in Ireland*), London: HMSO, 1893; *Royal Commission on Congestion*, London: HMSO, 1906-1908; *Departmental Committee on Agricultural Credit in Ireland*, London: HMSO, 1914; and *Commission on the Gaeltacht*, Dublin: Government Stationery Office, 1926.

9. Here, knitting machines provided by the British government for starting home industries, fell into the hands of gombeenmen, who hired them out to the wives of dependent clients. In conjunction with their hire, the gombeenman sold wool on credit to the home-worker. When the home-worker returned the finished garment its value was calculated by the gombeenman by deducting from a set price the rent of the machine and the cost of the wool. He then paid the remainder in shop-goods. MacGill (*Children of the Dead End*, *ibid.*, p. 4-8) estimated that a woman working 16 hours would earn about 1½d. worth of shopgoods after the gombeenman had made his four separate profits from the transaction.

capacity of mock "auctioneer") at artificially inflated prices. The gombeenman passed on the cash value of the sale minus commission to the "buyer", who had then four months to repay the debt at 6 per cent interest. The stock would then be immediately resold to the original owner and the process repeated.

Although engaged in many other varieties of economic operation (road contracting paid in truck, share-cropping in fishing, fattening of livestock on land seized—usually illegally—from insolvent clients, etc.) these were the principal modes of exploitation through which patronage was exercised. What they shared was the creation of ties of monopolistic personal dependence.

Political Patronage: Gombeenmen were extremely prominent throughout the period in every major Irish political party, although the zenith of their influence was probably reached in the Irish parliamentary party under O'Brien and Redmond.¹⁰ There were five basic forms of patron-client political relations at this time:

- (a) The use of ties of monopolistic economic personal dependence to secure a *bloc* of support for electoral and other political purposes.
- (b) The use of resources obtained through elected office to secure favours from party and state which directly promoted the gombeenman's economic position.
- (c) The use of resources obtained through elected office to neutralise or eliminate political opponents.
- (d) The use of economic resources to secure the support of local notables for political projects and ventures (donations to the Church, the Hunt, etc.).
- (e) The use of resources obtained by elected office to obtain favours for dependent and non-dependent clients.

Examples of each of these practices can readily be provided, but time does not permit their illustration. It should be noted, however, that the most characteristic combination of the practices to be found in operation on the western seaboard during this period was the creation of tied blocs of political support, and the use of these to gain access to semi-legitimate means of furthering the economic position of the gombeenman.

Ideological Patronage: With respect to those directly economically dependent upon him, the gombeenman served as a monopolistic source of certain ideological relations. He did this in three ways:

First, he often imposed an effectual moral order of his own on a locality, usually supported in this venture by a semi-dependent curate or parish priest.

10. The first serious historian of the Party was moved to describe its conventions as being composed of "half gombeenmen and half political priests" (O'Donnell, F., *History of the Irish Parliamentary Party*, London: Longmans & Co., 1910, vol. II, p. 468).

Second, as the local official representative of nationalism, he both interpreted nationalism to the local population and interpreted their economic and political grievances to the national party and state apparatus.¹¹

Third, as local representative of industry and commerce, the gombeenman would act out a role of innovation in "commercial" ideology, introducing notions of normal business practice, legal obligation, outstanding enterprise, etc.

It will be noted that the balance of patronage and brokerage roles occupied by the gombeenman in this period were of a *patronage* form. Brokerage was non-existent in any economic form, subordinate in political form to straight patron-client relations, and no more than equally significant in ideological relations.

(ii) *Patronage on the Western Seaboard Today*

On most of the western seaboard the great age of patronage appears to have passed. No longer do giants of old like the McDonagh family of Galway, or the Sweeney family of the Glenties (county Donegal) possess effectual empires, which in the McDonaghs' case at least covered over a thousand square miles. There is no doubt, however, that gombeenmen remain and that in many instances their degree of power, if not the physical area of their influence, is undiminished. In Inisheer (the smallest of the Aran Islands) the principal shopkeeper is still referred to locally as "the king".¹² In Inishkillane, a parish of county Clare studied by Brody, the general storekeeper still effectually monopolised all forms of power, and like the gombeenmen of old had the parish priest operating according to his instructions. The data for this study are derived from the recent anthropological studies of Messenger and Brody,¹³ from interviews with local informants, and from prolonged personal observation.

Economic Patronage: While moneylending, together with its masked forms such as the trust auction, has declined substantially as a source of gombeen economic power, credit-retailing combined with gross indebtedness remains the rule rather than the exception on the west coast. Reliance upon the gombeenman as principal source of personal and agrarian credit, and its correlate of bonded clientage, remain undiminished.¹⁴ Although it is not reported in any of the recent anthro-

11. Sometimes this interpretation would be literal; the gombeenman would be the principal member of the local elite speaking both Irish and English.

12. In a recent fictionalised description about a "respected" county Galway gombeenman, the author has his hero not only called the "Brown Lord" by his subjects, but has the latter hailing him as the true "king" of the area. Macken, W., *Brown Lord of the Mountain*, London: Pan Books, 1971.

13. Brody, H., *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the west of Ireland*, New York: Holt, Reinhardt & Winston, 1969.

14. In 1958 an official of the US Department of Agriculture who was commissioned to produce a survey of credit in rural Ireland concluded that almost all small farmers were indebted in some degree to shopkeepers and merchants, and that even among larger farmers the commonest means of obtaining credit for farm maintenance or improvement was to defer indefinitely payment on seeds, feeds and shop-goods. Gilmore, F., *Report on Agricultural Credit in Ireland*, Dublin: CSO, 1958.

pological field-studies, it is a fact that the use of debt-bondage to create a manipulatory work-force paid in truck still occurs in some areas. In Connemara it is customary for establishments to pay in groceries for outwork such as the making of novelties for tourists. There is also evidence of the continued practice of the bartering of shop-goods for peasant market produce.

To some extent even, novel forms of economic patronage and brokerage have appeared. Messenger reports from Inisheer that since the introduction of a means-tested unemployment assistance benefit (which most islanders claim) monopolisation by "the king" over the exchange into Sterling of overseas emigrant relatives' remittances has given him renewed economic and political power, since practically the whole island is at his mercy of disclosing their true incomes to the Home Assistance Officer.

Political Patronage: Gombeenmen are still disproportionately prominent in local and national government. Chubb's analysis of the social composition of county councillors and parliamentary deputies shows that publicans, small shopkeepers and small businessmen, who make up to 3.2 per cent of the employed adult population, represented 31 per cent of county councillors, 34 per cent of parliamentary deputies and 20 per cent of ministers in the last (Fianna Fail) government.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there seems to have been a change in the character of the patronage exercised. In its older form, political patronage had been largely commensurate with the use of client ties to gain electoral office for the gombeenman's own personal economic aggrandisement. Although each of the forms of political patronage already noted may still be found in operation today, there can be little doubt that there has been a change in emphasis in politics in the West toward the mobilisation of client ties to secure electoral office, which is now used as a stepping-stone to achieve further political advancement through the development and extension of a network of dependence amongst clients upon bureaucratic favours.

As a corollary, it commonly appears that administrative *favours* have somewhat displaced debt-bondage as a source of the recruitment of a political *bloc*.¹⁶ In other words, there is considerable evidence for suggesting that local-level political power on the western seaboard today depends just as much on the successful manipulation of brokerage or middleman ties as it does on patronage ties. The increasing importance of brokerage as a means of establishing and maintaining political power is borne out by an examination of the newest form of political relation based on personal dependence to emerge in the West. The source of dependence in this case is the Home Assistance Officer, responsible for the distribution of the dole. Occupants of this position are frequently said to be appointed as political

15. Chubb, B., *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, Conden: Stanford Univ. Press, 1970, pp. 94-6.

16. Nevertheless, the degree of reliance of some politicians on mobilisation of direct dependents (and, of course, relatives) is still very high. Messenger witnessed Inisheer's "king" haranguing his clients at the polling booth on election day (Messenger, *ibid.*, p. 65), while direct observation of similar phenomena elsewhere in Galway leads us to believe that this and similar practices remain common.

favours, and are often accused of administering the dole according to political criteria. Maladministration may take the form of making conditional the payment of welfare benefit on electoral compliance, or of paying benefit to the unentitled in return for promised future compliance. Some evidence of this practice may be the discrepancy between the number of illiterate adults recorded in the census for the western seaboard, and the considerably larger number of adults who claim the privilege of the public verbal vote reserved for illiterates (before polling station officials who would often generally include the Home Assistance Officer).¹⁷

Ideological Patronage: The gombeenman's function of moral patronage has suffered something of a parallel decline, although his brokerage functions remain to a great extent intact. Although gombeenmen appear almost everywhere as amongst the most authoritative figures in the community it was only from Inisheer that it was reported that despite resistance, "the king" was still able to publicly reprimand the grown men of the island as to their manners, morals and misdemeanors according to his own personal code.

The moral and ideological functions of the gombeenman appear to have changed little, however. The gombeenman still tends to occupy a monopolistic or semi-monopolistic position in interpreting ideas about commercial life and politics to the community, and of interpreting back to party and state local-level economic and social grievances.

(iii) *Patronage in "modernised" Ireland: Wicklow in the 'fifties*

Lowland Wicklow is by Irish standards prosperous and modernised, being the location of quite large commercial farms, populous and relatively well-off villages and some small-scale industry. This case-study is of social relations in the village of Baltinglass. The articulation of these relations became clearly visible in a famous local incident which occurred during the early 1950s, the so-called "Battle of Baltinglass".¹⁸ First, a résumé of the events of the "Battle". At this time, Ireland was ruled by a coalition government, in which the then National Labour Party was given the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs. During the period of office of the Labour minister, the job of postmaster in Baltinglass was awarded to the son of the local National Labour Party organiser, who was a shopkeeper and farmer. An outcry was raised locally, ostensibly on behalf of the temporary incumbent postmistress, in whose family the post had been held for eighty years. Although this outcry was in the name of the principle of hereditary office, it was in fact led by a number of local rival gombeenmen, whose main objections appear to have been that the Labour merchant would reap an unfair trading advantage from having the post-office installed in his shop-cum-bar, and that access to the local telephone exchange for the merchant would give him the opportunity of spreading

17. Records of numbers of illiterate voters are not kept. This statement is based upon reports of local Labour Party officials.

18. The sources of this account are Earl, L., *The Battle of Baltinglass*, London: Harrap & Co., 1952 and contemporary press accounts.

malicious gossip about his rivals. In the end, after both camps had pursued a number of strategies, the son of the merchant was forced to resign and the temporary incumbent was made permanent. In the process, a number of characteristics about the local operation of patronage and brokerage ties were exposed.

Economic Patronage: Ties of monopolistic personal dependence in the economic sector were of a rather different kind in Wicklow to those in the areas covered by the other case-studies. First, patronage based on customer-clientage was limited effectively to that created by debt-bondage. Marketing and employment followed normal capitalist lines, being constituted by relations between "free" agents. In the second instance merchant businesses in Baltinglass tended on the whole to be, by Irish standards, fairly large, and a good deal of the village population was dependent directly or indirectly upon one or other of the merchant families for employment. In a period of generally high village unemployment and shortage of other sources of remuneration, shop employment constituted a compelling patron-client tie. Third, besides the shopkeepers another set of economic patrons existed, namely two local ground-landlords, receiving capitalist ground-rent from local shopkeepers and farmers. At this time in Irish law, ground landlords had the right to evict under quite a wide number of circumstances, and it was the threat of such action by the Labour merchant's ground landlord which appears to have eventually proved decisive in his son's resignation.

Political Patronage: In Baltinglass prior to the "Battle", political patronage was, on the whole, restricted to:

- (a) The use of ties of monopolistic personal dependence to secure a political clientele, essentially for local government electoral purposes.
- (b) The use of resources obtained through election to secure favours for clients not yet tied to the broker.

Up to the appointment of the new postmaster, nobody appears to have exercised sufficient powers of political patronage to have been able to either directly promote their own business career, remove enemies from public jobs, crush local pockets of political resistance to causes harmful to the patron, or "buy" the political support of local notables. There is little doubt that up to the "Battle", most of the area's political "patronage" was in fact *brokerage*. The "Battle" itself, which in reality represented an attempt by one gombeenman to promote his business interests through his political connections (themselves relying on his holding elected office), reintroduced one of the older kinds of political patronage. For the most part though, brokerage had so firmly been established as the local political norm, that initial mobilisation against the merchant was organised almost wholly through brokerage. The incumbent postmistress's initial strategy of resistance was to contact local "notables", who she believed could act as brokers for her (a relative of a friend of another cabinet minister, the local clergy, county councillors, and parliamentary deputies). In addition, her various supporters duplicated this strategy with their own appeals to influential notables. It was not until these

strategies failed that the two sides began to mobilise their *economic* clients for street demonstrations and other popular actions. When these in turn did not realise their goal, direct exercise of the single tie of economic patronage in which the Labour merchant was a subordinate member of the opposing faction was necessitated.

Ideological Patronage: Ideological patronage proper did not exist in Baltinglass, but the locality possessed a number of ideological brokers. During the "Battle", their role was essentially that of provision of different rhetorics through which it could be fought out. In the camp of the incumbent postmistress, for example, a conflict could be discerned between traditionalists, who wished to see the conflict publicised nationally in terms of an affirmation of the principle of hereditary office, and those, such as a local parliamentary deputy, who expressed the affair as an example of the coalition government's indulgence in jobbery and corruption.¹⁹

II

As a prelude to discussing anthropological attempts to relate changes in relations of patronage and brokerage to structural change in the light of the evidence presented, let us first try to summarise the principal changes in the different aspects of patronage which we delineated.

(i) *Relations of Economic Patronage*: Debt-bondage created by credit-retailing appears to have remained fairly constant in extent, being an important factor in each of the cases considered. However, it is certain that the *degree* of debt-bondage in individual cases has diminished from its alarming character during the period 1870 to 1930. For example, cases of gombeenmen seizing the property of insolvent clients are practically unheard of today. The traditional corollary of credit-retailing, money-lending, appears on the other hand to have diminished both in extent and degree. The other various forms of usurious and semi-usurious economic relations organised traditionally around debt-bondage are also on the decline, and are now more or less confined to the remoter parts of the western seaboard.

These relations have on the whole been replaced by the normal commercial relations of a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production. In Ireland, however, with its traditional shortage of opportunities for industrial employment and investment, otherwise purely capitalist economic relations such as those between shop-owners and shop-assistants, and ground landlords and ground lessees occasionally command a characteristic of the generation of personal dependence typical of patron-client ties.

(ii) *Relations of Political Patronage*: The generalisation can be made that there appears to have been a transition from patronage exercised on the basis of the

19. This was to prove of some embarrassment to the traditionalists, who at the stage of the "Battle" when this conflict arose were trying through their own brokerage resources to fix up a compensatory local government job for the displaced incumbent postmistress.

mobilisation of economically dependent clients to gain electoral positions through which the gombeenman could promote his business interests, to patronage and brokerage mobilised in a combined fashion to create blocs consisting both of dependent clients and "friends" won over through favours. With their support the "modern" gombeenman hopes to gain electoral position, through which he may extend his web of friends and launch a political career.

This process is reflected in the increasing importance (which Bax notes in his article) of professional politicians in the articulation of patronage and brokerage relations.

Again, however, it should be noted that political patronage of the old form may be mobilised in "extreme" situations. This implies, of course, that a basis for it in economic and social relations remains.

(iii) *Relations of Ideological Patronage*: The same kind of transition appears to have occurred in this aspect of patronage, although in a more extreme form. Ideological patronage in the sense of a gombeenman being able to dictate his own personal code of moral imperatives and obligations on a community, has now been almost entirely displaced. It has given way to a noticeable broadening of relations of brokerage, of service as an ideological intermediary between society in general and/or the state and local communities.

On the whole, our case-studies therefore appear, with some reservations, to bear out the "weak" transactionalist thesis positing a general transition from patronage based on patrimonial and patriarchal economic and ideological ties, to brokerage, based on "primitive" political parties. Certain special features of Irish society, notably scarcity of economic resources and the Proportional Representation voting system, have served to shield brokerage from the incursions usually made upon it by the transition of the interventionist and reforming state. Underlying this position is, as we have seen, the notion of state-formation and development as the typical means by which autonomous political empires of local patrons are replaced by various administrative and political intermediaries possessing differential degrees of latitude in the negotiation of the relations between the dual components of the society. Earlier, this conception was termed "neo-Weberian". By this it was meant that this thesis in turn presumed the notion of homologous cross-institutional paths of modernisation, secularisation and integration following from the progressive expansion of the role of rational-legal authority, embodied in the state.²⁰

On the other hand, there remain a number of anomalies between the evidence and these theses, which it is necessary to examine closely in order to see how far they have in fact been confirmed. The anomalies we wish to deal with are three in number.

First, it will be noted from the evidence that despite the general trend toward

20. Representative statements of this broader thesis are to be found in the theses on modernisation of Bendix and of Almond and Powell. See Bendix, R., *Citizenship and Nation-Building*, New York: Wiley, 1964 and Almond, G. and Powell, G., *Comparative Politics & Developmental Approach*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1966.

the displacement of patronage by brokerage, there are certain decisive forms of social relations of a patronage nature which both remain, and whose existence cannot be ascribed to the "shielding" function of economic scarcity or Proportional Representation. For example, in each case-study it was clear that credit-retailing, the most common basis of patronage, was extremely common, and that it remained decisive in determining certain relations of political subordination. It was even observed how new forms of economic bondage could come into existence, for example, through the monopoly of the local gombeenman in exchanging remittances of foreign currency to a population dependent upon the secrecy of this operation. The preservation and even reproduction of these relations have taken place despite what can undisputably be regarded as the "modernisation" of Irish society, in the form of the emergence of a nation-state with its own bureaucratic, repressive and ideological apparatuses, in the shape of a shift from ascription to achievement as the basis of the constitution of dominant status groups, in the growth of commercial agriculture, of *per capita* income and gross national product, and so on.

Secondly, this patronage appears *not* to exist as a survival or relic in the most remote and backward areas (though it is there that it finds its formidable expression), but as an outgrowth of certain ties which are in no recognisable sense "traditional" at all. On the contrary, these ties are anchored in a certain form of commercial relation *specific to commodity economy*. Credit-retailing, despite its element of barter and its frequent association with forms of usurious exploitation based on barter, was only introduced into the Irish countryside with the *passing* of the classically patrimonial phase of landlord rule. Credit-retailing spread to the West only when a number of conditions combined to determine it: when, after the Famine the subsistence economy of the feudalised cottier-population employed by tenant-farmers largely for labour-rent had collapsed when the remaining small subsistence landholders were forced to adopt an element of commercial farming to provide an income with which to pay what were now cash-rents; and when, because of a lack of a market in rentable and purchasable land, ambitious peasants, together with some returned emigrants, sought to make their career in non-agricultural relations in a non-industrial society. The forms of the penetration of patronage into the Irish countryside were in fact none other than the forms of the penetration of petty-capitalism.

The third anomaly arises in the question of the transition from patronage to brokerage. Despite the fact that patronage *did* decline, and *did* suffer displacement by brokerage with state-formation and modernisation, and despite the tremendous development of brokerage, particularly in the political and ideological spheres, it appears that when put to the test, as in Wicklow, patronage appears to possess greater efficacy than brokerage in "delivering the goods". The quantitative multiplication of brokerage ties has not led to brokerage becoming a qualitatively stronger political resource than patronage. For with the enormous quantitative expansion in the obtaining of favours for all and sundry by political brokers, there has been a distinct marginalisation in each particular consequent relation of this

type. No longer is it possible to use brokerage to achieve large-scale frauds, as it was in the days of the Congested Districts Board. The overwhelming majority of broker-client deals are quite trivial in content, and often constitute no more than personalised forms of obtaining normal legal entitlements.

It should now be possible to summarise a number of criticisms of the orthodox theory of patronage and brokerage suggested by these anomalies

1. Patronage is neither extinguished as a phenomenon, nor displaced by brokerage with the onset of political modernisation and the growth of brokerage as a phenomenon.
2. Patronage does not require the "survival" of feudal or traditional social relations to sustain it.
3. Despite the multiplication of ties of dependence through the growth of brokerage, patronage still appears in the last instance to be a more effective means of enforcing power.

The orthodox thesis cannot meet these criticisms. In fact, in order for these "anomalies" to be accounted for, they must be taken as the raw material for *new answers* to the question of the causes of patronage and brokerage, and their nature as a means of enforcing power.

The answers which appear here are largely in the form of suggestions for further research. Taking first the question of patronage, any answer would have to proceed by looking for factors common to both the typical social site of patronage-feudalism and petty-capitalism, as it was to be found in nineteenth century rural Ireland. Such a factor would be *compulsory* and *monopolistic* character of the social relations of production in both modes of production. This characteristic element of feudal social relations did not require a fully-fledged feudalism or patriarchy to sustain it in rural Irish petty-capitalism, or even a continuity between the latter and the former. Instead it could have been called into being, as Laclau has pointed out with respect to Latin America,²¹ by the equilibrated development of the dominant capitalist mode of production as it penetrates a society with a local shortage of the disposable conditions of production of land and labour-power.²² This "feudal" social relation may or may not exist in conjunction with other elements of the feudal mode of production within a given social formation. But whether or not it exists as part of feudalism proper, it will have its own distinct political and ideological effects: patronage can therefore be analysed in terms of being a combination of such an economic relation and such a set of effects.

Following on from this, brokerage can be analysed in terms of the *dissolution* of

21. Laclau, E., "Capitalism and Feudalism in Latin America", *New Left Review* 69 (September/October 1971).

22. Prior to the Famine, another different set of compulsory and monopolistic social relations existed between a huge cottier population and a small number of commercial tenant farmers. In this case, they arose as a consequence of the penetration of earlier forms of the capitalist mode of production in the situation of a local shortage of money capital.

this social relation. For unlike patronage, brokerage is distinguished by its non-compulsory character. It is the outcome of voluntary strategies by ostensibly "free" partners. Like the serf, whose legal tie to his manorial lord was underwritten by the latter's monopolistic disposal over local land, the small farmer of nineteenth-century Connacht could not shift his clientage, even when not in legal bondage, since the gombeenman possessed monopolistic control over local retailing and marketing. The emergence of brokerage appears, in the west of Ireland at any rate, to be related to the *multiplication* of local gombeenmen, through the emergence of greater numbers of petty-capitalists from the ranks of the farming population during the boom years during, and immediately preceding, the first World War. The effects of such changes may be sought by examining the weakening of the dependence of less indebted clients, and the stimulation of competition for their custom. It is in these circumstances that new strategies for the creation of clientele would come into play, and that politics would become conceived as a means of establishing factionalised sets of dependents. Any subsequent competition in the provision of favours would of course depend on some level of political modernisation having taken place, but such modernisation could never represent the necessary and sufficient condition of the emergence of this phenomenon.

Finally, how can patronage be more effective as an instrument of power than brokerage? If the causes of brokerage are really to be sought where we have suggested, then it would follow that allegiance in local-level politics could be characterised in terms of the relations between local notables and doubly-articulated sets of dependents. The politically-involved petty-capitalist may have a faction made up of clients dependent on either his patron or broker roles, or both. In any conflict, brokerage relations could sustain neither withdrawal by clients dependent on a different patron, nor any excessive demand placed upon them by a broker. Being always in principle transferable, they would always be weaker than the enduring basis of fractional allegiance to be found in complete economic dependence.

III

In conclusion, it might be asked what kinds of general issues are raised as problems for further analysis by this discussion. Apart from the problem of developing research in the way suggested, these appear to be two in number, and both concern the efficacy of the incorporation by political anthropology of the theories and assumptions of modernisation theory. The first is that of whether modernisation theory is an adequate tool for the analysis of the process of social, political and ideological transition in complex societies, the second is that of whether, because of the nature of its own categories and concepts, political anthropology could be integrated with any other kind of theory of change without abandoning its traditional object.

First, the question of the adequacy of modernisation theory for the general

comprehension of the kinds of changes described in this paper. It could be said that the findings outlined above stood as a question-mark in relation to notions and theories of an uninterrupted, linear, evolutionary and expressive modernisation process. The basis of the continued significance of patron-client relations in the Irish countryside appears to depend not upon the "survival" of vestigial traditional or patrimonial social structures, but on the emergence and solidification of new forms of usurious petty-capitalism, recreating feudalised social relations of production in its march of progress. In the Irish case, "progress" appears in actuality to have taken the form of the combined and uneven development of different modes of production combining a diversity of elements from classical "feudalism" and classical "capitalism", which while ultimately deriving their co-presence from the dominance of successive forms of metropolitan capitalism, cannot be regarded as transparent "expressions" either of its developmental principles, or of any sociologised description of its rationalistic properties. In Ireland at least, neither the economy nor the state developed through a progression of simple evolutionary stages, nor did changes in the rest of the social formation appear to "correspond" directly to changes occurring in the "essential" sector. In our case studies at least, the clue to transitions in patron-client relations should be sought not in any general theory of modernisation, but in some theory which is able to grasp the specificity of particular forms of uneven economic and political development and their determination.

This conclusion leads inevitably to our second general issue: is it in fact possible to amalgamate political anthropology with a different, i.e. non-evolutionist, theory of social change while still retaining its characteristic subject-matter and methodology? It appears upon reflection that social anthropology has always been associated with some kind of evolutionism. Even after Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown banished its worst excesses, as they appeared in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century "cultural" anthropology, evolutionism still crept back into the new anthropology in the account of the development of increasingly effective functional equilibration between normative institutions and what was rather naïvely called "actual behaviour".

As we have seen, this evolutionism has persisted in the marriage between the transactionalist analysis of social processes and the sociological analysis of their location within rapidly changing complex societies. In this context, "actual behaviour" is seen as a series of adjustments to evolving modernisation. The question is whether this is merely chance, or whether "actual behaviour" and its structure as it is understood by orthodox anthropologists, can be viewed in any other context. The argument at this point must of necessity turn to an examination of this notion of "actual behaviour". It will be argued that because of the purely empiricist conception of social structure that this constitutive theoretical object implies, political anthropology has *no option* but to associate itself with an evolutionism whose inadequacy we hope to have demonstrated. In traditional anthropology, "actual behaviour" was studied in conjunction with the analysis of normative juridical institutions. Both forms of analysis were regarded as

essentially descriptive in content, and both were circumscribed, as Banaji has pointed out,²³ by the purely descriptive categories of "role", "status", "conflict", "authority", "prestige" and "sentiment". Social structure was regarded simply as an aggregate of different constellations of the data subsumed by these categories. Functionalism, in a sense, was no more than an injunction to study this aggregation as a unitary totality, that is, without structured combinations and oppositions and with none but a *formal* regulative principle.

In modern transactionalism these descriptive categories are replaced by others of precisely the same status: "action-sets", "quasi-groups", "social networks", "factions", and of course, patron-client and patron-broker-client relations. Social structure is again conceived as an aggregate of these relations. Its existence in both cases is only at a purely empirical level, and is given no theoretical determinacy.

In consequence of the absence of any complex abstract conception of social structure which could account theoretically for evenness and unevenness within the totality, the diachronic conceptualisation of the societies in question must inevitably take the form of the movement from one substantively unitary and untheorised aggregate of sub-structures to another. Any *particular* change must therefore be conceived simply in terms of *temporal succession* rather than determined structured transition, and change in general must be conceived in the form of a succession of simple, linear and individually untheorised steps. It is *this* which poses the insuperable problem of introducing a complex dynamic into the process. If any dynamic is to be introduced it must be a purely external one: one fixing this series of otherwise arbitrary successions into a pattern of *stages* in an ongoing process. Evolutionism is in fact the only dynamic corresponding to this requirement. It appears to be called forth, of necessity, by the attempt to dynamise an empiricist conception of society which refuses any internally theorised conception of the relation between its parts.

The general issues raised by these reflections in fact bring us rather unexpectedly to a really fundamental problem for further analysis, namely, whether anthropology can allow itself to lend notions like "patronage" and "brokerage" the status of its most abstract and indissoluble categories, simply on the basis that they denote types of so-called "actual behaviour" to be met with significant regularity. The answer to this question depended on whether the Anglo-Saxon tradition in the discipline can free itself from the redolent empiricism which has characterised it from its inauguration, and take up some different, non-aggregative conception of social structure which would allow the utilisation of such relatively concrete concepts within a provenly adequate theory of the development of social formation.

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23. Banaji, J., "The Crisis of British Anthropology", *New Left Review* 64 November/December 1970.