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1

Introduction

Government has no other end, but the preservation of property.

—JOHN LOCKE

How large should government be? What roles should it fulfill? What activities should it regulate, if any? How much power should be centralized rather than allocated to more local authorities? These are some of the most important questions that any organized society faces, age-old questions that have been fought over for as long as government has existed. And they remain just as relevant today, and as hotly debated, as at any time in history.

Today, developed countries have universally embraced what are by historical standards large and interventionist forms of government. The specifics vary across countries—in health care, for example, Britain’s government-based system differs substantially from the private system of the U.S.—but the differences, when seen from a historical perspective, are much smaller than the similarities. Across a wide range of policy areas, from pollution to food quality assurance, from unemployment insurance to workplace safety, governments in developed countries play an active interventionist role, typically utilizing relatively similar policy tools.

This situation is not without its critics. There are some who believe that many countries would be better off with a smaller, more inexpensive, and less intrusive form of government. Others think that government still does far too little. These vast disagreements exist, in part, because we have relatively little experience to draw from. With most developed countries following a similar path, it is difficult to know how well substantially different approaches might work. As a result, historical episodes that lie further outside the set of

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recent experiences can be particularly useful as a way to better understand the consequences, and the origin, of modern welfare states.

This book examines a unique experiment in limited government—Britain’s nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* experiment—and uses it to provide some perspective on how, and why, so many countries have embraced a large and interventionist form of government. Britain’s experience during this period makes for a fascinating case study in government development, because it represents the most extensive embrace of *laissez-faire* ever undertaken in an industrialized and politically stable society. By 1850, the British economy was institutionally and politically stable, industrialized, and at the forefront of the technology of the time, and yet it had what is, by today’s standards, a strikingly small and limited government. This was no accident. Built on an intellectual foundation stretching from Thomas Paine to John Stuart Mill, a *laissez-faire philosophy* that emphasized small and unobtrusive government came to dominate British politics and policy in the middle of the nineteenth century. Guided by this philosophy, in the first few decades of the nineteenth century British politicians and policymakers actively endeavored to shrink the footprint of government, both in terms of fiscal expenditure and, more importantly, in terms of regulatory interference.

Yet, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Britain was moving away from *laissez-faire* in many (though not all) areas of government, and toward a larger and more interventionist form of government. By examining this evolution in detail we can answer two important and related questions about the role of government. First, how well did limited government work? Second, why was limited government abandoned in favor of the more interventionist government found in the U.K., and essentially all other developed countries, today? Answering these questions can help us understand why our current system of government looks the way it does as well as allow us think about how we might expect government systems to evolve in the future. For, as the economic historian Jonathan Hughes memorably wrote in his seminal 1991 study of the U.S. government, attempting to understand government as we experience it today without the historical dimension “is like trying to imagine a tree—roots, trunk, branches, limbs, twigs, leaf structure, and all—by studying only crosscuts.”¹

Britain’s nineteenth-century experience is a particularly interesting episode to study, not only because of the extent to which *laissez-faire* was embraced, but also because of the impact that this experience has had on the intellectual debate over the role of government. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed their ideas while living in England in the middle of the nineteenth century. So did some of the fathers of modern economics, including John Stuart Mill, Alfred Marshall, Walter Bagehot, and John Maynard Keynes, who, born toward the end of my study period, wrote about *The End*

of *Laissez-Faire*.² Later, influential thinkers of both the right and the left would feature these events in some of their most important work, such as F.A. Hayek in *The Road To Serfdom* and Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*.³ Through these and a myriad of other channels Britain's experiment with laissez-faire continues to shape our thinking about the role of government. All the more reason to understand it better.

1.1 The Laissez-faire Experiment

Britain's laissez-faire experiment emerged out of Enlightenment ideas about individual freedom and new ways of thinking about the role of government. Influential thinkers, such as John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, and Adam Smith, began to question established ideas about the role of government and its relationship to the governed. While laissez-faire was rooted in Enlightenment ideas, it was also viewed as an antidote to the more corrupt and venal system that characterized government in the eighteenth century. Over time, this laissez-faire philosophy—which I define as a philosophy of favoring small and limited government and a reliance on private and voluntary organizations to solve social problems—gained influence among politicians and policymakers in Britain and elsewhere.

While laissez-faire was embraced as a useful principle by many of the leading intellectuals and politicians of nineteenth-century Britain, it is important to recognize that acceptance was not dogmatic. Even some of the strongest advocates of the approach, such as John Stuart Mill, were willing to admit to exceptions. Instead of being considered dogmatic, Britain's embrace of laissez-faire should be thought of as a practical and sensible, but also flexible, reaction to an older and more corrupt system of government, one where intervention often served primarily to reward favored groups at the expense of the rest. In this respect, Britain's experiment reflected the best Enlightenment traditions of empiricism and experimentation.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, laissez-faire was the dominant philosophy of government in Britain. Its ascendance was marked by a series of major legislative victories stretching from 1800 into the 1850s: The New Poor Law of 1834, for example, sharply restricted government welfare support for the poor and unemployed, while the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 reflected the triumph of free trade over protectionism. These were, however, just the most visible aspects of a much broader move away from government intervention, a stripping away of regulations built up over centuries.

I begin this book by tracing out the rise of laissez-faire, as well as the intellectual and economic conditions under which it occurred. The heart of the book, however, is focused on understanding why, once adopted, Britain eventually abandoned the laissez-faire approach. Most of this movement

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toward a more interventionist form of government occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, though in some policy areas the roots of intervention can be traced back into the first half of the century. By 1914, the end point of my analysis, the laissez-faire approach had been fundamentally undermined and the foundation of the modern welfare state established.

Why did Britain abandon laissez-faire in the second half of the nineteenth century? Existing answers to this question fall into three broad groups. One explanation dates back to A.V. Dicey's *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion in England During the Nineteenth Century* (or just *Law and Public Opinion*), written in 1905. The core of Dicey's argument is that laissez-faire was abandoned because of changes in cultural attitudes ("public opinion") that made government intervention more acceptable.⁴ A second explanation, associated with the work of Oliver MacDonagh, is that humanitarian concerns led to early regulatory interventions and that these, through the development of inspectorates and other enforcement mechanisms, created the momentum for further reform.⁵ Alternatively, a third approach emphasizes the importance of political factors, most notably the extension of the franchise to working class voters.⁶

While there are kernels of truth in all of these theories, a careful study of the process through which Britain turned away from laissez-faire also reveals their shortcomings. As we will see, important early moves away from laissez-faire were implemented by leaders who strongly believed in small government, but who nonetheless felt that while laissez-faire was a useful default there were also circumstances that called for experimenting with alternatives. This directly contradicts Dicey's idea that a change in public opinion pushed Britain away from laissez-faire. Put simply, laissez-faire was not abandoned because ideology changed. Rather, ideology changed because of experiences that led contemporaries, who often believed in laissez-faire, to recognize the drawbacks of unregulated markets. MacDonagh's focus on humanitarian concerns may be able to explain intervention in some areas, such as child labor, but it fails to account for movements away from laissez-faire on a broad front, including in a range of policy areas where humanitarian concerns were unlikely to have been influential. Explanations based primarily on shifts in political power run into a similar problem; while they can explain some of the new initiatives taken by government in the second half of the nineteenth century, there are many others that cannot be explained by political factors. For example, some of the most important initiatives taken by government in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the imposition of compulsory schooling in the 1870s, were opposed by many in the working class, yet they were adopted despite the fact that workers were slowly gaining political power during that period.

This book advances an alternative explanation for Britain's progressive abandonment of *laissez-faire* in the second half of the nineteenth century, one that provides a more consistent and comprehensive account than existing theories. In my account, the economic forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution play the starring role. The Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, unleashed enormous economic and social changes. Industrialization fundamentally altered production techniques, but it did much more than that. It unleashed rapid urbanization, creating cities far larger than any seen before. New industrial transportation technologies, such as railroads and steamships, led to enormous increases in trade and migration, connecting the world like never before. Increasingly sophisticated technologies fundamentally altered one industry after another, while simultaneously raising the importance of human capital.

Yet, as the myriad changes unleashed by the Industrial Revolution gained steam across the nineteenth century, they exacerbated a set of market failures, ranging from pollution externalities to asymmetric information problems between distant buyers and sellers. These increasingly severe market failures created a demand for government intervention. At the same time, the rapid advance of science and technology, ranging from the development of germ theory to the creation of apparatus for analyzing adulterated food, provided governments with new tools for identifying and addressing problems. These forces—which simultaneously increased the severity of market failures and provided new tools for addressing them—eventually induced British policymakers to begin to intervene in the economy in a variety of ways, despite their belief in *laissez-faire* as the best default policy choice. These various interventions, undertaken in a piecemeal and pragmatic fashion, eventually undermined the *laissez-faire* economy to the point where, by the first decade of the twentieth century, it had been effectively abandoned.

The idea that the economic changes unleashed by the Industrial Revolution were the primary force propelling the expansion of British government intervention in the second half of the nineteenth century is not novel. Derek Fraser (1973), for example, saw the early evolution of the British welfare state as “an erratic and pragmatic response of government and people to the practical individual and community problems of an industrial society.”⁷ However, as Bernard Harris points out, existing work on “the ‘industrialization’ thesis, fails to explain the precise mechanisms by which concerns about social conditions are translated into political action.”⁸ I attempt to fill in this gap. What is new here is an attempt to understand, on a fundamental level, the economic forces that were at work, the challenges that they created, why non-governmental actors struggled to address those problems, and the process through which government eventually stepped into the breach. In answering

these questions, the insights and tools of modern economics will prove invaluable. I will rely on them extensively, though they will be presented in a nontechnical way.

In the end, there are many points of agreement between my analysis and previous work. Like MacDonagh, I emphasize the influence of “intolerable” conditions that called forth government action.⁹ MacDonagh argued that “the exposure of the actual state of things in particular fields was in the long run probably the most fruitful source of reform in nineteenth-century England. The bare facts of the extent of suffering, waste, dirt, or disease when made known corroded the opposition to reform, whether that opposition was grounded in doctrine, self-interest or inertia.”¹⁰ I agree. We also agree on the “irreducible brute matter of the new and unprecedented social problems” that “private enterprise did not and could not resolve.”¹¹ Where this book goes further is in tracing out the process across a broader range of government functions, making explicit the economic forces that led to these “intolerable” conditions, and harnessing the tools of modern economics to help us understand why private and voluntary organizations fell short in dealing with them.

Most of this book is dedicated to tracing out the process through which government intervention began and expanded across a wide range of policy areas. One of the reasons existing explanations have run into trouble is that previous studies typically examine only a select sample of government functions. Many focus on a few well-known policy areas, such as the Factory Acts regulating industrial employment, poor relief and unemployment insurance, urban sanitation, and possibly education. Depending on the policy areas chosen, one can find support for explanations based on humanitarian concerns, working class activism, or political developments. These explanations, however, tend to run into problems when the analysis is broadened to include a wider range of government functions, a point made by Henry Parris in an early critique of MacDonagh’s work.¹² To avoid this pitfall, I base my analysis on a review of a much wider range of government functions than previous work. While I cover all of the classic welfare-state policy areas, including poor relief, industrial labor regulation, education, and urban sanitation, I add to this list a number of other topics which have received less attention in previous studies: the regulation of sea and land transportation infrastructure, food quality, policing, vaccination, telegraph systems, urban housing, and more. By taking in a broad sweep of government activity, I avoid settling on explanations which work well for a subset of topics, but fail for others.

Another pitfall in studying this topic, one that I aim to avoid, is overemphasizing the fiscal size of government. Doing so is tempting, because fiscal expenditures or tax revenues provide an easily quantifiable measure of government activity. For this reason, we already have some excellent studies with

a more fiscal focus, such as Peter Lindert's *Growing Public*.¹³ However, as we will see, the most important government interventions that took place during the nineteenth century were regulatory and left little trace on fiscal accounts. These interventions came in the form of regulation backed by relatively small and inexpensive inspectorates: in factories and mines, in railroads safety, in food quality, in vessel seaworthiness, in pollution regulation, in housing codes, etc. Even when the goals of a policy were primarily redistributive, such as the (unsuccessful) effort to impose a ten-hour workday in factories in the 1840s, the mechanisms employed were often regulatory rather than fiscal. While there were a few exceptions—policies that did come with more substantial fiscal outlays such as policing, education, and Poor Law relief—these represent only a select subset of the government activities we are interested in, and even there, most of the expenditure was collected and spent at the local level.

Because regulations that involved limited fiscal expenditure were such an important part of government activity prior to the twentieth century, it would be a mistake to rely on fiscal data to assess the scope of government intervention during the period I study. So, while I do examine patterns of government spending in those policy areas where expenditures mattered, I do not ignore the even more important regulatory activity that government undertook. This allows a broad assessment of the extent of government intervention, and sets my study apart from previous work focused only on fiscal expenditure.

1.2 The Efficient State

One of the striking regularities that I observe across a wide range of policy areas is the central role played by concerns about *efficiency* in debates over the expansion of government intervention. While British policymakers did not have the language or tools of modern economics, it is clear that on some level they understood the market failures that they faced and the inefficiencies that these failures created. So, to cite one example, in a debate on child factory labor, we see Lord Macaulay arguing in 1846 that “I do not deny that a factory child will produce more, in a single day, by working twelve hours than by working ten, and by working fifteen hours than by working twelve. But I do deny that a great society in which children work fifteen or even twelve hours a day will, in the lifetime of a generation, produce as much as if those children had worked less.”¹⁴ In debates over food quality regulation, to cite a second example, we see contemporaries troubled by the “painful reflection, that the division of labour which has been so instrumental in bringing the manufactures of this country to their present flourishing state, should have also tended to conceal and facilitate . . . fraudulent practices” of

food adulteration.¹⁵ In railroad regulation, contemporaries understood that there were losses involved in the exercise of monopoly power, just as they understood that the failure to adopt a standard gauge had consequences for the efficiency of the system.¹⁶ These are just a few of the many examples that the reader will encounter in this book.

In fact, both the adoption and the subsequent abandonment of *laissez-faire* can be understood as part of the same pragmatic search for a more efficient state. At the heart of this process were Enlightenment ideas about examining and testing the efficacy of policies. As Diderot put it: “All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception, and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”¹⁷ This philosophy opened the door for experimenting with small government, but it also meant that, in cases where the *laissez-faire* approach appeared inadequate, British leaders were willing to experiment with alternatives.

Common to both the adoption and the abandonment of *laissez-faire* was a search for more efficient outcomes. Here, I mean efficiency as economists use the term: Pareto efficiency, defined as a situation in which no one can be made better off without someone else being made worse off. Repeatedly, in the coming pages, we will see that efficiency and waste were at the heart of policy debates. Of course, these were not the only concerns that influenced policy. Humanitarian concerns played an important role in some policy areas. Political expediency or the power of entrenched interest groups also mattered; they could accelerate or delay reforms for many decades. Religious differences were often important, particularly early in my study period. Yet it was concerns about inefficiency and a pragmatic willingness to search for new solutions that drove government intervention forward across a broad set of policy areas.

This is not to say that British policymakers always found the most efficient solutions. There are several cases where, in retrospect, it appears that intervention likely went too far. The barring of women from whole categories of work, as in the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842, is a clear example of overreach, and the nationalization of the telegraph system was unlikely to have improved the efficiency of operation. Errors are to be expected as an unavoidable part of experimentation. Yet, looking across the range of government interventions initiated during the nineteenth century, we should note that a large number of these policies continue in Britain today, and many have been copied by other countries. This suggests that many of the policies implemented during the period of expanded intervention were, and are, viewed as broadly successful.

One key feature of the economist’s concept of (Pareto) efficiency is that efficiency can be achieved even in situations with extreme inequality, as pointed out by Ronald Coase in 1960.¹⁸ So, an economy can be (Pareto)

efficient even if one group holds almost all of the resources: as long as no resources are being wasted, no one can be made better off without someone else being made worse off. Recognizing this aspect allows us to contrast the *efficient state* approach to government with the approach to government that emerged in the early twentieth century. In the first decade of the twentieth century, at the end of my study period, we can begin to discern the efficient state approach to government giving way to something new: a government that was concerned not only with removing inefficiencies, but also with directly manipulating the distribution of income and wealth. By the time that David Lloyd George proposed his famous Peoples Budget in 1909, British policymakers had moved from the efficient state to a new *equality state*. The rising political power of the working class, reflected in the election of the first Labour candidates to Parliament, was a driving force behind this change.

I am not arguing that equity concerns were absent during the nineteenth century. In fact, equity was a central concern of many of the leading thinkers of mid-century England. John Stuart Mill, for example, wrote extensively about the topic.¹⁹ However, during most of the nineteenth century, government was seen as tipping the scales in favor of the wealthy and advantaged. The solution to problems of inequality was to be found in limiting, rather than expanding, the role of government: getting government out of the way, so that the less fortunate could achieve their potential. Of course, some attempts were made to introduce government policies with specifically redistributive aims. The ten-hours movement of the 1840s is one prominent example. However, these attempts, by and large, failed. Where we do see policies with redistributive effects, such effects were typically incidental to other aims. This pattern began to change as the end of the nineteenth century approached. From that point forward, and certainly by the time of the People's Budget (1909/1910), equity became a major motivation for government intervention. The efficiency state of the nineteenth century was being displaced by the equality state of the twentieth.

Conceptualizing the nineteenth-century development of British government in this way also helps us address another lingering question: Is the expansion of government in an industrialized economy inevitable? A casual observer might be tempted to answer this in the affirmative; after all, almost all of the government activities that emerged in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century can be found in all developed countries, and many middle-income countries, with only relatively modest modifications. Yet this is a superficial explanation. By focusing on my efficiency argument, we can gain a richer understanding of the inevitability of "big government." Specifically, the British experience shows us how, within a *laissez-faire* system, the advance of industrialization, urbanization, commerce, and technological

progress exacerbate a set of market failures. Under these conditions, abandoning laissez-faire may not be inevitable, but failing to do so becomes increasingly inefficient. Countries unwilling to bear the cost of that inefficiency will eventually move toward a more interventionist approach, as almost all modern developed countries have. Whether they go further, by also attempting to address inequality, is another matter.

1.3 From State Development to the Welfare State

At least since the publication of Charles Tilly's influential book on *Coercion, Capital, and European States* there has been intense interest in the European state formation and the development of state capacity. Researchers from across the social sciences, including sociologists such as Tilly, historians such as John Brewer and Steven Pincus, political scientists such as Francis Fukuyama and Barry Weingast, and economists including Daron Acemoglu, Tim Besley, Douglass North, James Robinson, and Torsten Persson—and many others—have investigated the sources, and consequences, of European state formation.²⁰ These efforts have led to substantial advances in our understanding of the process of state formation and the importance of stable states for subsequent economic and political development.

The focus of the state formation literature is largely on events in the early modern period, including the Glorious Revolution in England, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution. This focus makes sense; by 1800, roughly the starting point for this study, Britain and a number of other European countries already had well-developed states. Yet these states faced a fundamental question: beyond making war, what, if anything, should they do?

This question was largely answered during the nineteenth century. As we will see, by the end of the nineteenth century, early forms of most of the nonmilitary functions undertaken by modern states—with the exception of those of a primarily redistributive nature—had been established. Housing policy, pollution regulation, food quality, infrastructure development, urban utilities, unemployment insurance, welfare, public education, workplace safety: the origin of all of these policies, and many others, can be traced to the nineteenth century.

Tracing out the development of government during the nineteenth century can, therefore, help us understand the transition from the warfare state of the early modern period to the modern welfare state. Or, to adopt the framework of Douglass North, John Wallace, and Barry Weingast, from a *limited access order* to an *open access order*.²¹ They define a limited access order as one in which “personal relationships, who one is and who one knows, form the basis for social organization.”²² At the beginning of the period I study, an

individual's background and connections had a strong influence on their life. For example, jobs in the civil service were essentially closed to those from working class backgrounds, military commissions could still be bought and sold, and apprenticeship barriers determined who could enter certain crafts. During the nineteenth century, Britain transitioned toward an open access society, a shift that entailed "a set of changes in the economy that ensure open entry and competition in many markets, free movement of goods and individuals over space and time, the ability to create organizations to pursue economic opportunities, protection from property rights, and prohibitions on the use of violence to obtain resources and goods or to coerce others."²³

The embrace of *laissez-faire*, which stripped away old patterns built around personal relationships, played a key role in this transition. Yet *laissez-faire* was not enough. As Douglass North recognized in a 1987 essay, taking advantage of the potential gains offered by opening up markets required the development of institutions that helped those markets function more effectively by, among other things, reducing transaction costs.²⁴ In Britain, most of the institutions developed for this purpose originated during the nineteenth century, as the country grappled with the economic forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution and the embrace of *laissez-faire*.

It is therefore surprising that the development of nineteenth-century government has received much less attention from social scientists in recent years than either the centuries just preceding it, where the state formation literature has focused, or the period that began with the onset of the First World War. When researchers have paid attention to nineteenth-century government, their attention has often been focused on just a small subset of government functions. The most prominent of these are classic welfare-state functions such as poor relief and unemployment insurance, as well as interventions related to urban sanitation. Historians have been particularly active in these areas, building on the work of Oliver MacDonagh and Derek Fraser, cited above, as well as the earlier work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.²⁵ A notable recent example is George Boyer's study of *The Winding Road to the Welfare State*. Added to these is a substantial set of studies tackling different aspects of government policy in isolation, many of which I will draw on in the coming pages.

My study moves beyond a narrow focus on the welfare state, to take a broader view of the functions of government as they were evolving during the nineteenth century. Doing so is possible only because I am able to take advantage of a number of excellent specialized studies on particular areas of government activity. By focusing on the nineteenth century, I also provide a bridge between existing work on state formation and the large literature on the modern welfare state. Finally, I capture a critical period during which Britain transitioned from a limited access to an open access society.

1.4 Supply vs. Demand

S. E. Finer, in his monumental *History of Government*, wrote about “that intrusive, inescapable, and unremitting direction and control, which is how we nowadays regard ‘government,’” which “began about a century ago on the back of the industrial and then the technological revolution.”²⁶ In connecting industrialization to the development of modern government (to which he devotes an entire chapter), Finer emphasizes the new capacities that industrialization provided, specifically the “immense new capability for collecting, storing, and retrieving information” as well as the ability to support a vastly expanded bureaucracy.²⁷ These are what economists would describe as supply-side factors; forces that increase the ability of the government to supply governance.

My analysis, in contrast, emphasizes the central role played by demand-side factors in creating the link between industrialization and the expansion of government intervention. By demand-side factors, I mean those forces that increased the demand, or need, for government intervention. Specifically, I describe how the economic and societal changes unleashed by the Industrial Revolution created growing inefficiencies that British policymakers eventually realized could only be addressed through government intervention. Supply-side factors that improved the capacity of policymakers to identify and address these issues did play an important role in loosening the constraints on intervention in particular policy areas. Broadly, however, I will argue that demand-side factors were the key driver of the expansion of government activity in Britain during the period I study.

1.5 Scope of the Inquiry

In a project of this kind, defining the scope of the inquiry is critical. As has already been mentioned, the temporal scope of this study is the period stretching from around 1800 up to the onset of the First World War. Given the enormous disruption generated by the First World War, that forms a natural end point for this study. The starting point is less definite, and in some sections I will discuss events occurring before 1800.

In terms of geographic scope, my focus is on England and Wales, which for ease I will refer to as Britain. Many of the policies implemented in England and Wales also appeared in Scotland (either directly or through separate legislation), but to keep the scope manageable I will not attempt a comprehensive discussion of Scotland.

I will also largely set aside Ireland, though for a different reason. My interest is in how the British governed themselves. While Ireland was part of the U.K. during this period, it was “an alien and even hostile country” in the

words of Joel Mokyr, that, in many ways, was treated more as a colony than an integral part of the country.²⁸ To cite just one example illustrating how differently Ireland was treated, in 1822 Parliament felt free to impose a system of national policing on Ireland, the Irish Constabulary. In contrast, in England and Wales, such an imposition on local authority was viewed as inconceivable even several decades later.²⁹ Ireland will make a few appearances throughout my analysis, in places where the Irish experience informed the design of legislation applied to England and Wales. Some of the regulations I described, such as the Passenger Acts, also applied to Ireland. However, given the fundamentally different way that the problem of governing Ireland was viewed, a thorough examination is best left for future work.

A similar argument applies to the British Empire. Governing the Empire was viewed as a fundamentally different enterprise than legislating domestically. Laws that would have been inconceivable in England could be implemented elsewhere, and principles seen as sacred in the English context could be violated abroad. In fact, the existence of the Empire played very little role in informing the domestic government activities that are my primary interest.

It is also important to set some limits in terms of the topics considered. One closely related topic, which I touch upon but do not attempt to deal with comprehensively, is taxation. This may come as a surprise in a book about the expansion of government. This restriction is reasonable because most of the government interventions initiated during the nineteenth century required relatively little fiscal outlay, particularly from the central government. Instead, most intervention involved regulation, backed by a relatively inexpensive regime of inspectors, though there were some notable exceptions (policing, education). Thus, as I have already emphasized, examining the fiscal size of government and how it was funded tells us relatively little about the extent of government intervention. Moreover, several high-quality studies of taxation during this period, such as Martin Daunton's *Trusting Leviathan*, or the more comparative *Taxing the Rich* by Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage, are already available.³⁰

Another topic, which could be included among those covered in Part III of the book, but is not, is government regulation of the financial system. This is omitted mainly for practical reasons. The development of the financial system is a complex topic. To do it justice would require a substantial lengthening of the book, one that does not seem necessary given the broad set of government functions already included. It is better left for future work.

1.6 Roadmap

This book is divided into three parts. Part I is largely descriptive, identifying the key conditions that allowed laissez-faire to emerge in Britain, and

then tracing out that process. Part II describes the economic forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution and the challenges that they created for the laissez-faire economy. Drawing on insights from economics, I provide a brief overview of the types of market failures that emerged or were exacerbated as the economy grew and modernized, generating demand for government intervention. I also discuss some of the important scientific and technological advances occurring during this period which provided the government with new tools for identifying and addressing these market failures. Thus, Part II provides the building blocks that are needed to understand why government began to intervene as the nineteenth century progressed.

Part III, the largest section of the book, traces out the expansion of government intervention in a broad array of policy areas. The problems that government faced in each of these areas differed in important ways, as did the responses. As a result, each section provides a slightly different viewpoint from which to consider the expansion of government intervention. While the results of these various sections reinforce one another, it is not necessary to read all of them in order to begin to discern the broader themes that emerge. Some readers may want to pick and choose, selecting those topics that seem most interesting to them.

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