

The Past as a Foreign Country: Reconciling Contending Approaches to History and Development Policy

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Source material

- Woolcock, Michael, Simon Szreter and Vijayendra Rao (forthcoming) 'How and why does history matter for development policy?' *Journal of Development Studies*
 - Available as BWPI working paper # 70, 2009
- Bayly, C.A., Vijayendra Rao, Simon Szreter and Michael Woolcock (eds.) (forthcoming) *History and Development Policy* (Manchester University Press)
 - Constituent chapters available as BWPI working papers
 - See especially contributions by Bayly and by Smith
- Woolcock, Michael (2009) 'Toward a Plurality of Methods in Project Evaluation: A Contextualized Approach to Understanding Impact Trajectories and Efficacy' *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 1(1): 1-14

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (1953),
opening line

Overview

- Development policy and its decision-making imperatives
- Why history matters for development policy
 - Case 1: (Big picture) The ‘trajectory’ of human rights (Hunt)
- Two stylized approaches to ‘thinking in time’
 - Institutional economics, Social/demographic history
 - Making knowledge claims
- Applying historical sensibilities to development
 - Case 2 (Big picture): Origins of the Industrial Revolution
 - Case 3 (Small picture): Assessing project efficacy
- A contested, negotiated reconciliation
 - More evidence, richer theory, better policy
 - The past as a foreign country

The world of development policy

- Strongly favours linear, mono-causal explanations of success and failure...
 - ... that map onto a standardize-able response
 - You're a bona fide *star* if you can provide it
 - Sachs, de Soto, Yunis, Prahalad ...

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 - Higher uncertainty α stronger justification for 'best practices'
- Has very weak (narrow) theory of change, and little evidence, informing many of its key activities
 - Exhibit A: 'Institutions', 'good governance', 'rule of law'
 - "Accelerated modernization via transplanted best practice"

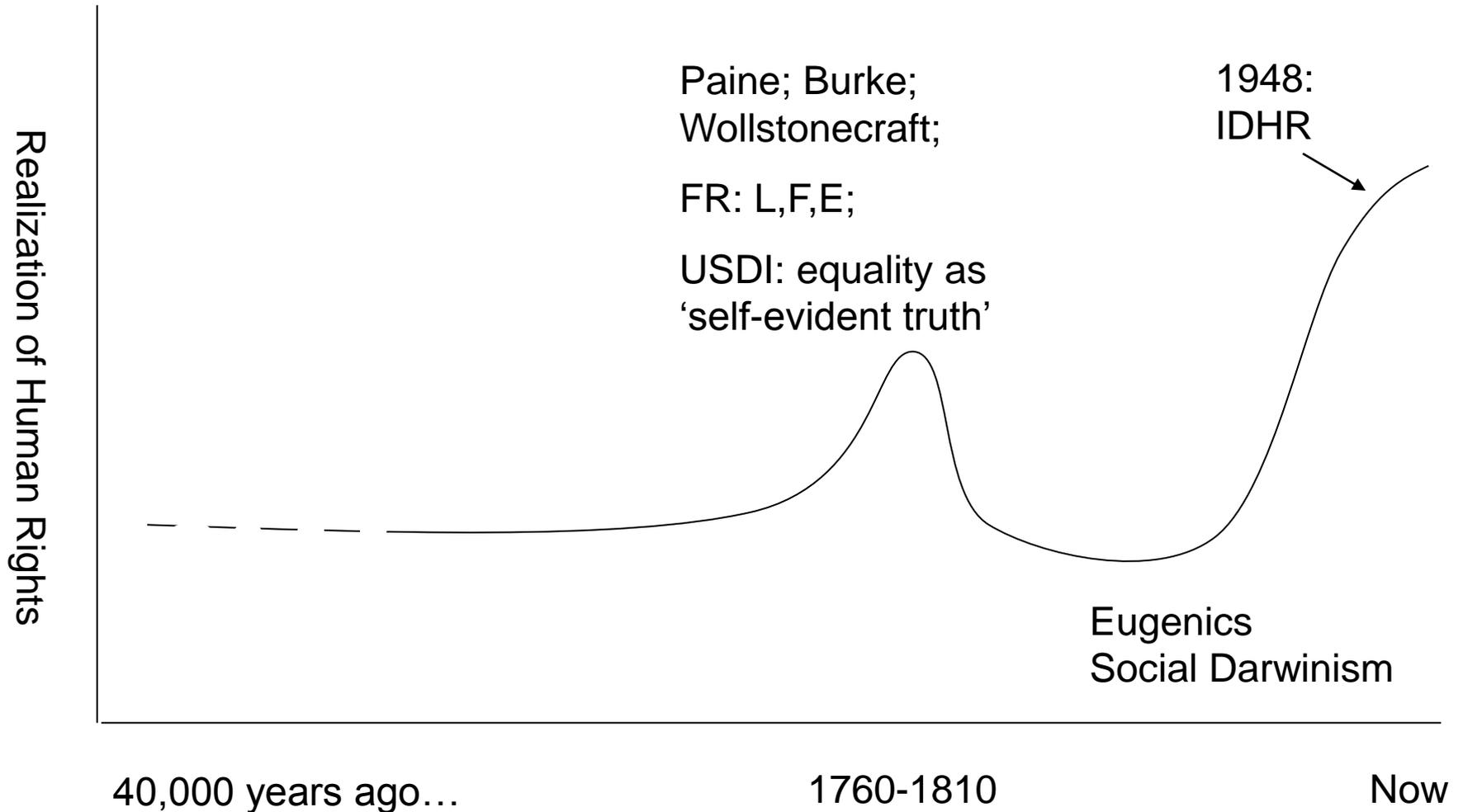
In political and legal reform, a key underlying problem...

... is a deeply a-historical understanding of the dynamics of institutional change. Economics

- *“was not created to explain the process of economic change... Standard theories are of little help in this context. Attempting to understand economic, political and social change (and one cannot grasp change in only one without the others) requires a fundamental recasting of the way we think”* (North 2005: vii)
- History (the discipline) can and should be a central component of this ‘recasting’

Case 1: Human rights – a historical trajectory

Adapted from Lynn Hunt (2007) *Inventing Human Rights: A History*



Two stylized approaches to ‘thinking in time’ (Neustadt and May 1986)

1. ‘Historical economics’ (AJR, Nunn 2009, et al)
 - Time as one variable among many
 - Identification strategy is king
 - Very narrow criteria for what counts as a valid knowledge claim regarding demonstration of causality
 - Search for the factor – common law, property rights, colonial legacy – that explains wealth and poverty of nations; ‘great reversal’
 - Development policy types eat this up... (WDR 2006)

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2. Social and economic history

- More defined by its methodological sensibility than substantive focus
 - Causal claims made and substantiated on the basis of empirical (and quantitative) evidence, but using a different epistemology
 - ‘Legal standard’: Preponderance of the evidence; beyond reasonable doubt...
 - and different teleology
 - ‘Multiple modernities’

History (the discipline) as a scholarly sensibility focuses on...

- Non-linear , idiosyncratic trajectories (Hunt)
 - ‘Process tracing’
- Unpacking conjunctural causality (Szreter)
- Observing unobservables (de Vries)
- Hybridity (Bayly)
 - of ideas, practices, organizational forms
- Plausible alternative counterfactuals (Ferguson)
 - What might have happened, but did not?
 - (Which can of course include ‘natural experiments’... D&R 2010)
- Structure-agency-ideas dynamics (Blanning, Tilly)
- Micro political economy (Hindle)
 - Shifts in identities, motivations, interests, alliances

Case 2:

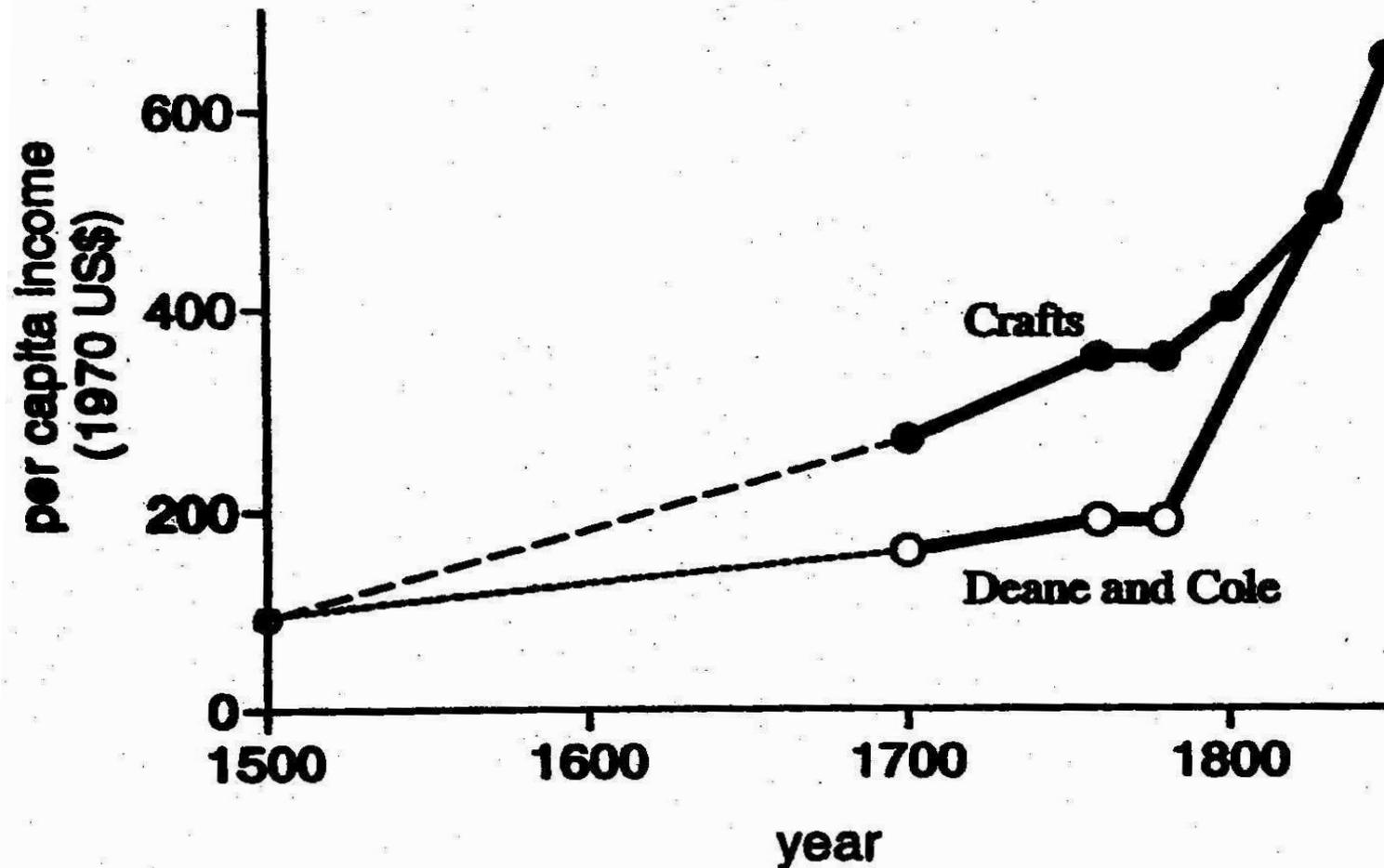
Determinants of the Industrial Revolution

- (Origins and dissemination of public education, public health, natural resource administration)
- The industrial revolution:
 - Why, when and how did it ‘take off’ first in Britain, and not the Netherlands (or France, or...)?

Historical economists' answer

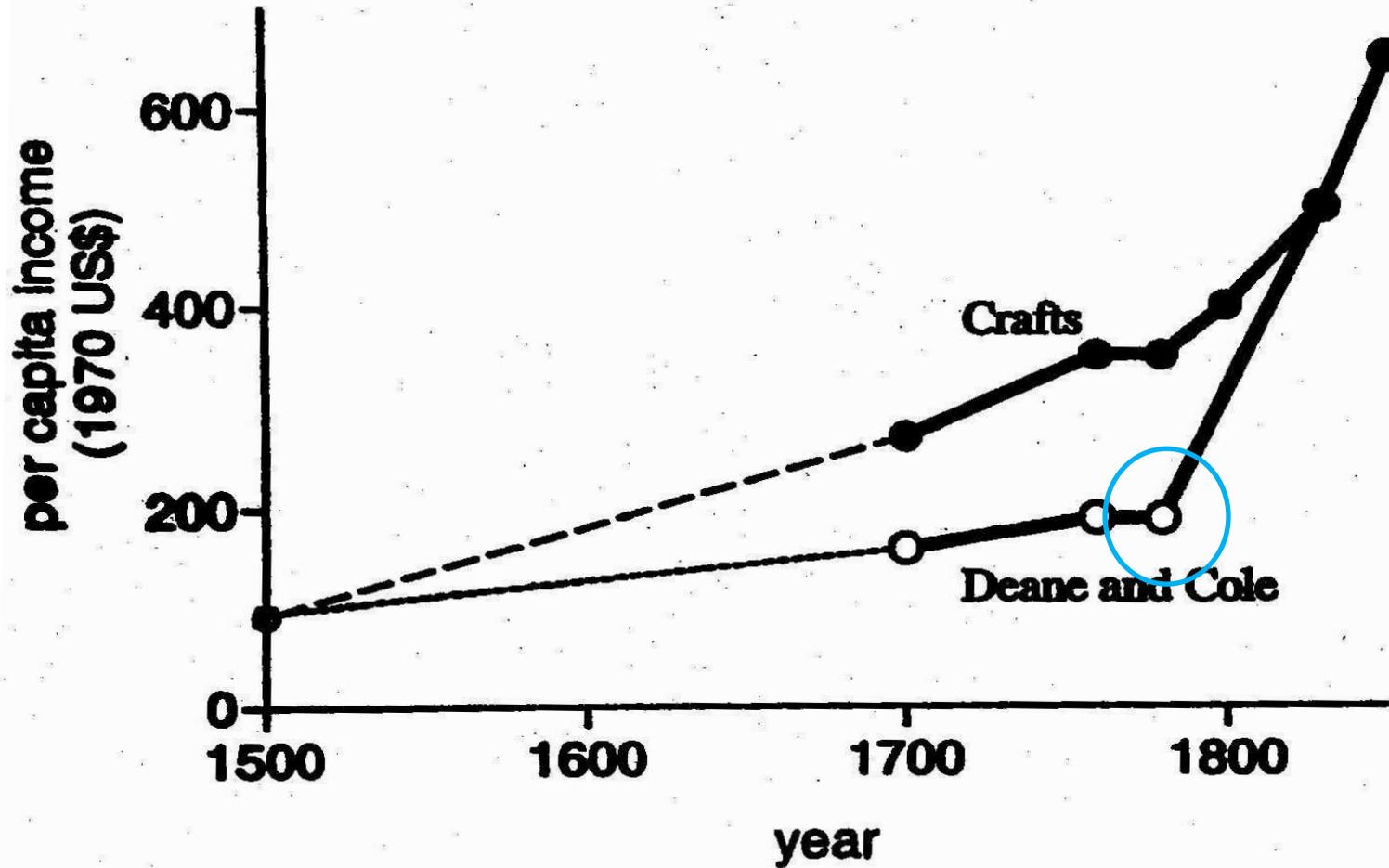
- Property rights, 'the rule of law' (common law), and open access political and economic systems emerged first in the UK because of particular intra-elite bargains that transformed "social privileges into legal rights"; this *unintentionally* created an entry point for successive waves of subordinate groups to also claim these rights, thereby establishing market economies, democratic polities and just societies (North, Wallace and Weingast, 2009)
 - An almost exclusively 'supply side' story...
- Policy implications: grant property rights; establish the rule of law; open markets
 - What "are" these things? Whatever works now in rich countries, so transplant and accelerate 'best practices'

English per capita income

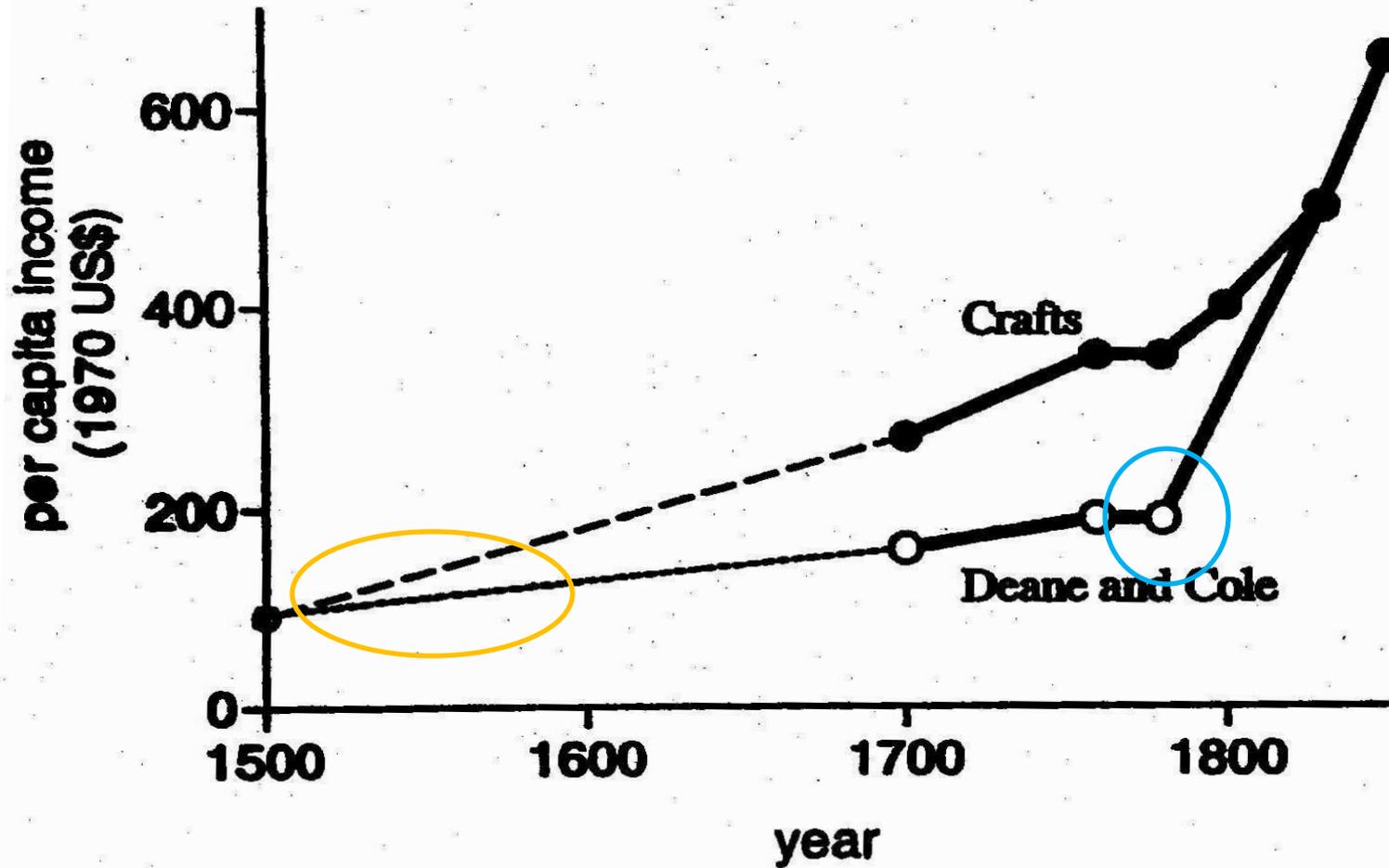


E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield: *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (1981)
C.K. Harley, 'British Industrialisation before 1841: evidence of slower growth during the industrial revolution'
Journal Of Economic History 1982
N. Crafts, *British Economic Growth During the Industrial Revolution* (1985)

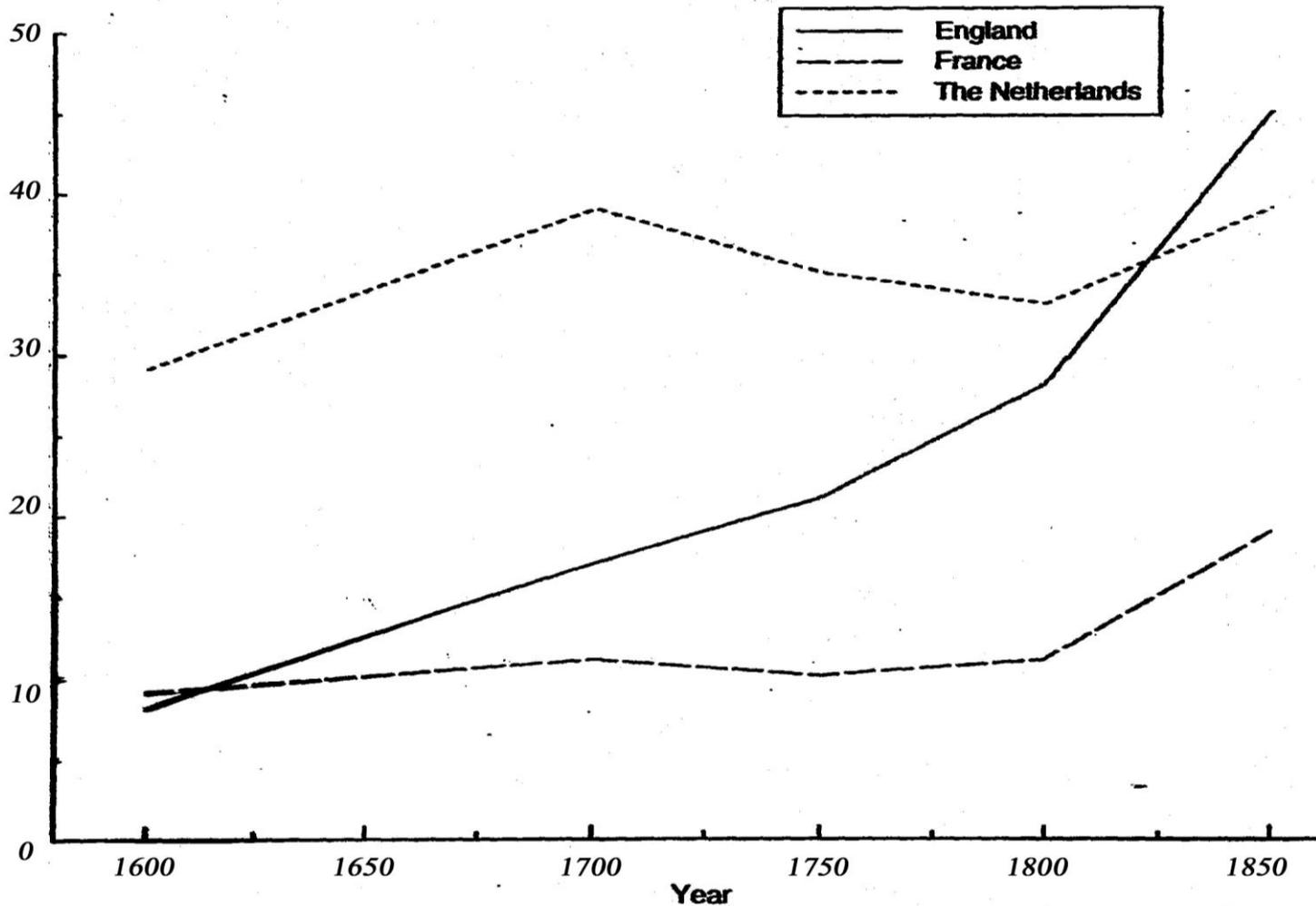
English per capita Income



English per capita Income



Urban Growth in England, France and the Netherlands, 1600-1850



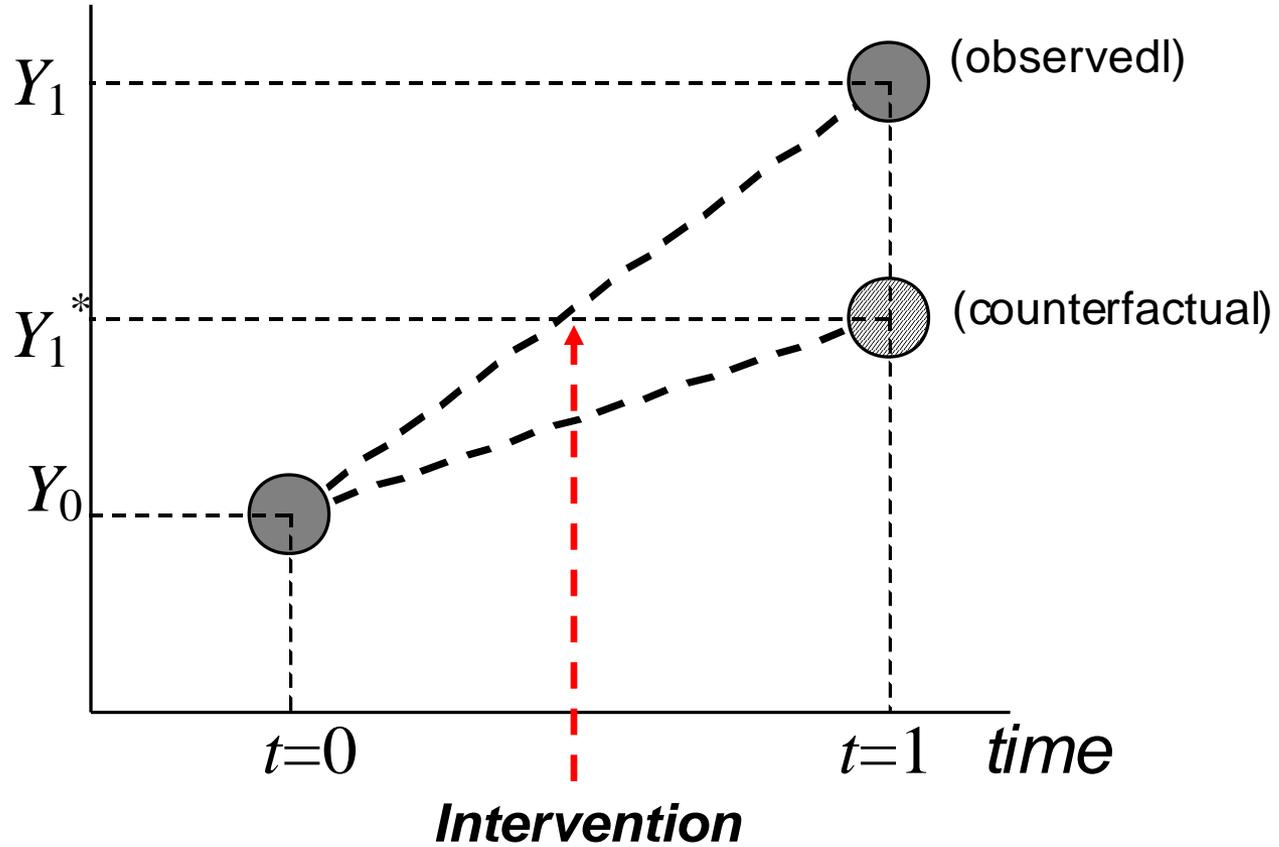
Social historians' answer

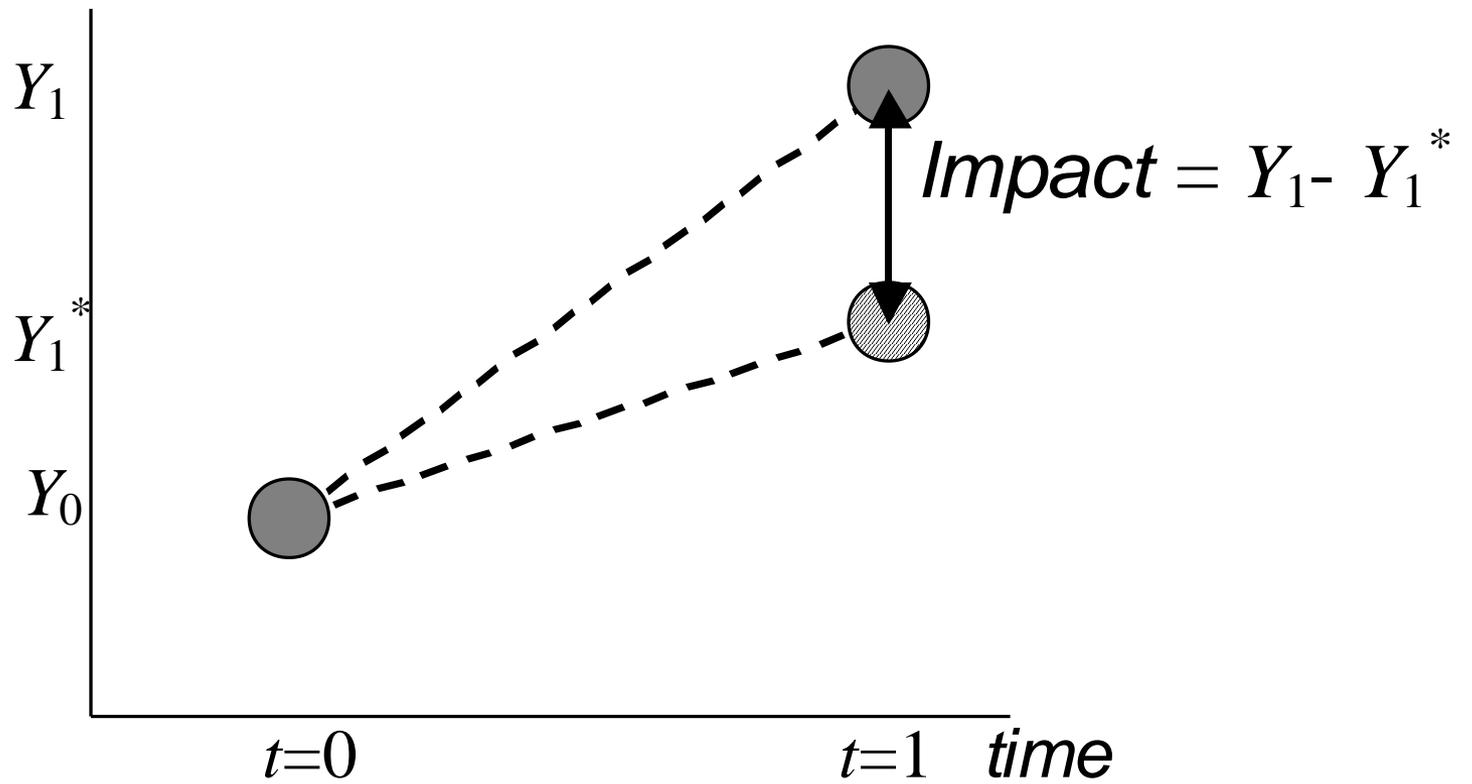
- Britain first experienced an industrial revolution because
 - It simultaneously experienced an 'industrious revolution' (de Vries), a complementary demand-side shift in tastes and preferences
 - For 200+ years *before* the IR proper, its people had the first and only comprehensive social protection system: Identity registration + Early Poor Law
 - Freed up capital and labor
 - Portable, decentralized, guaranteed
 - Peter Solar (1995), Simon Szreter (2007), Richard Smith (2009), Steve Hindle (*On the Parish?*, 2004)
 - Causal impact demonstrated through assembling a range of different data sources; comparative case analysis

Case 3: Small Picture

Assessing project efficacy

Evaluation 101

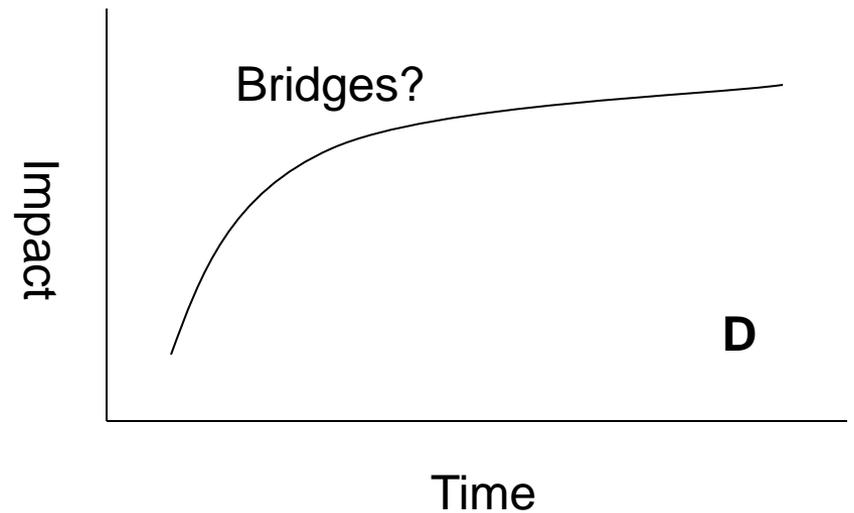
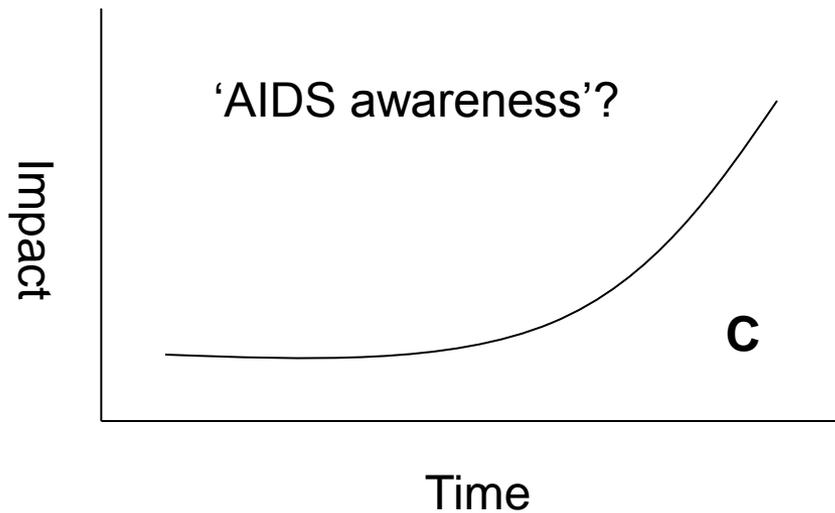
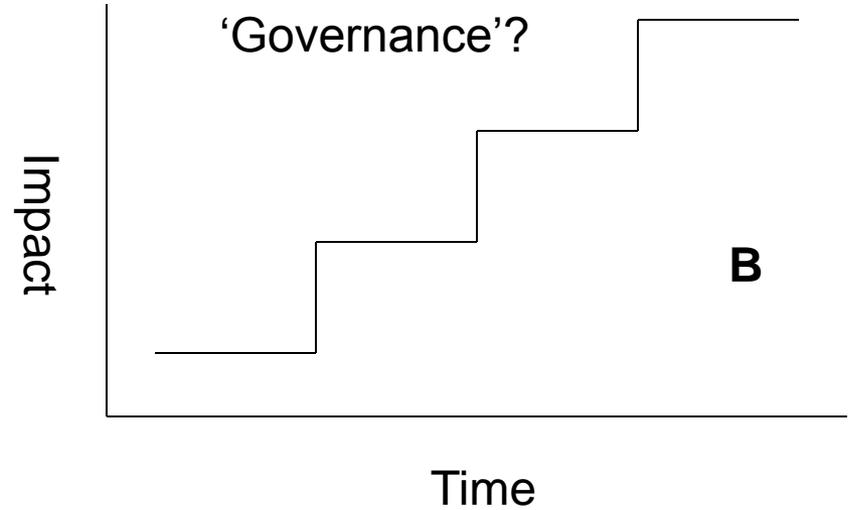
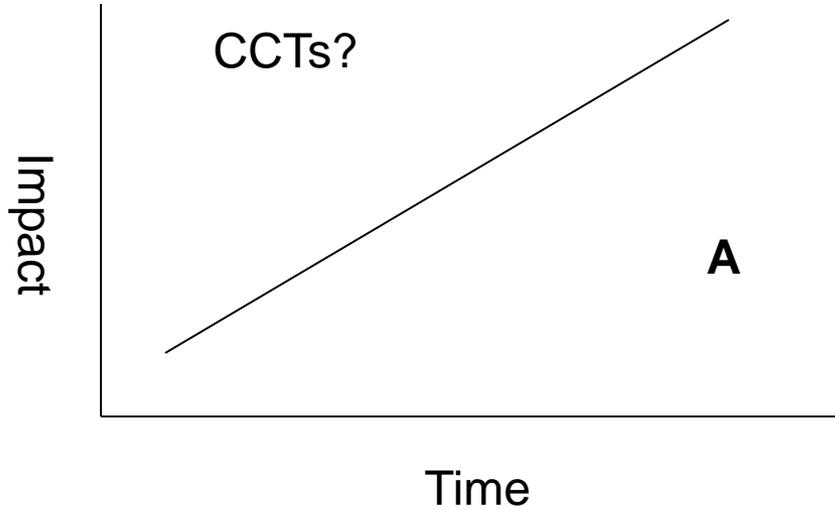


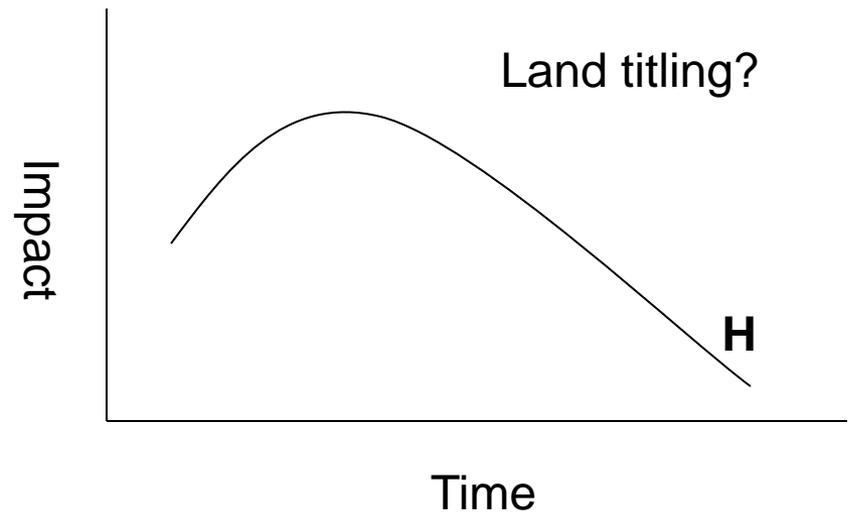
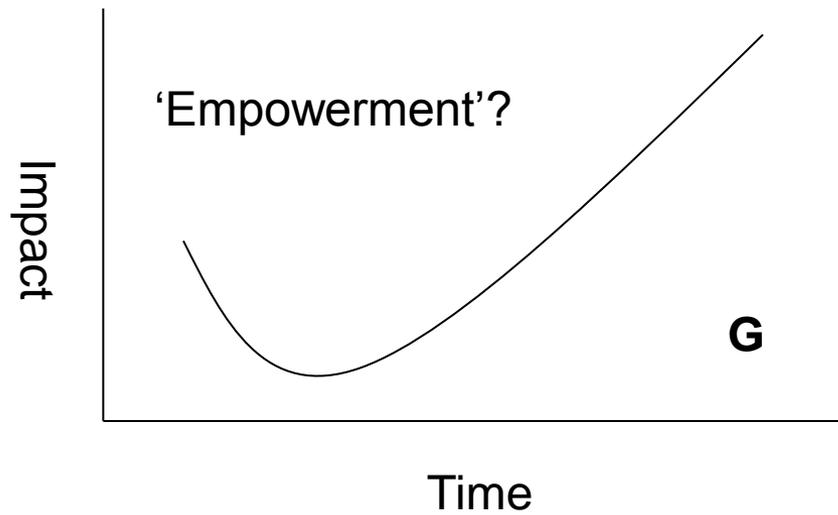
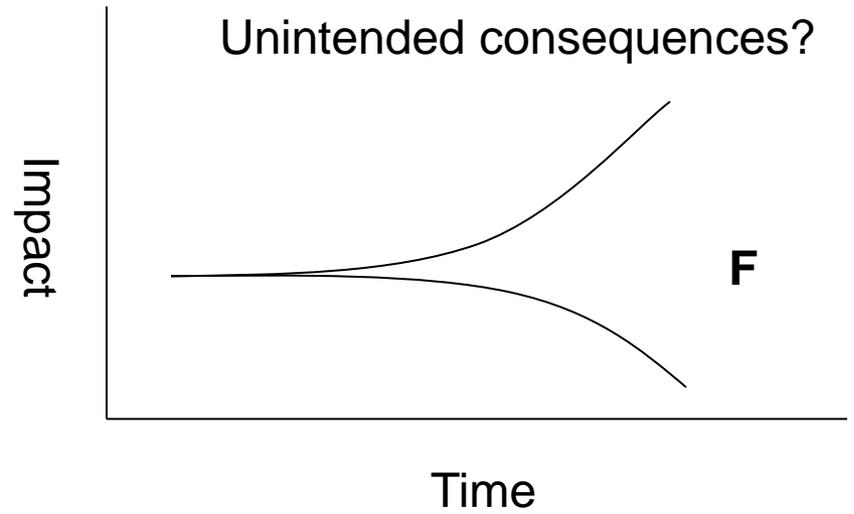
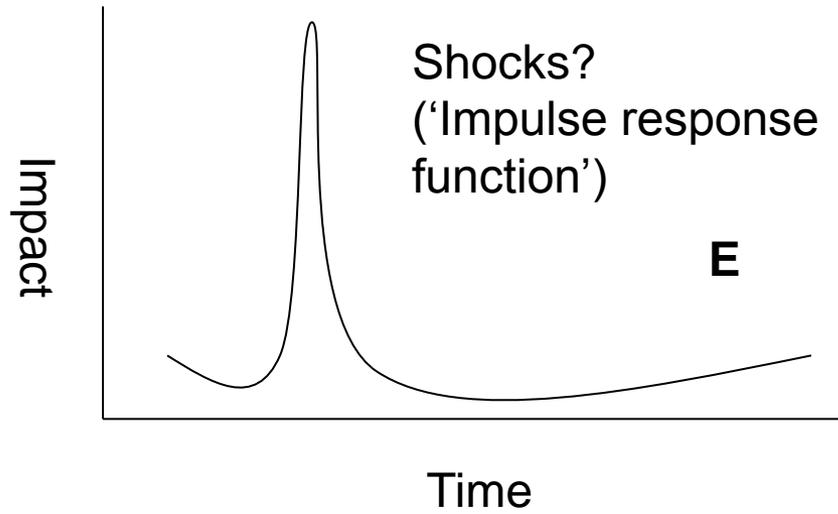


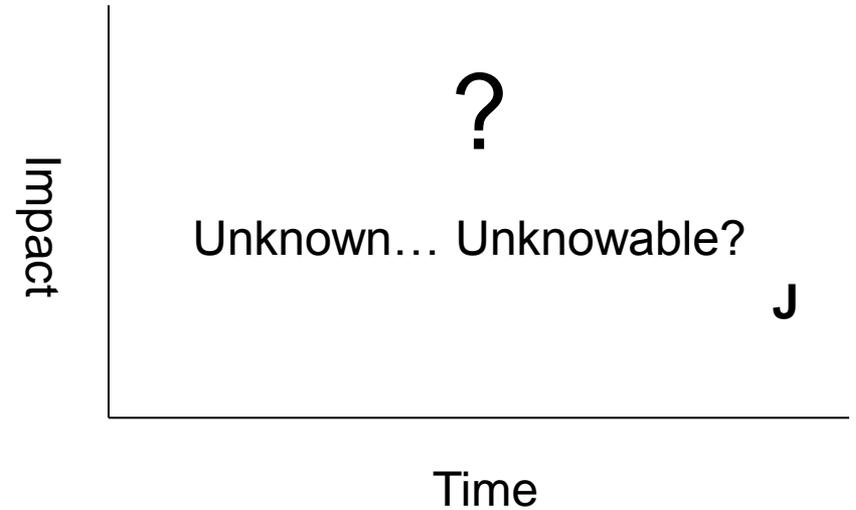
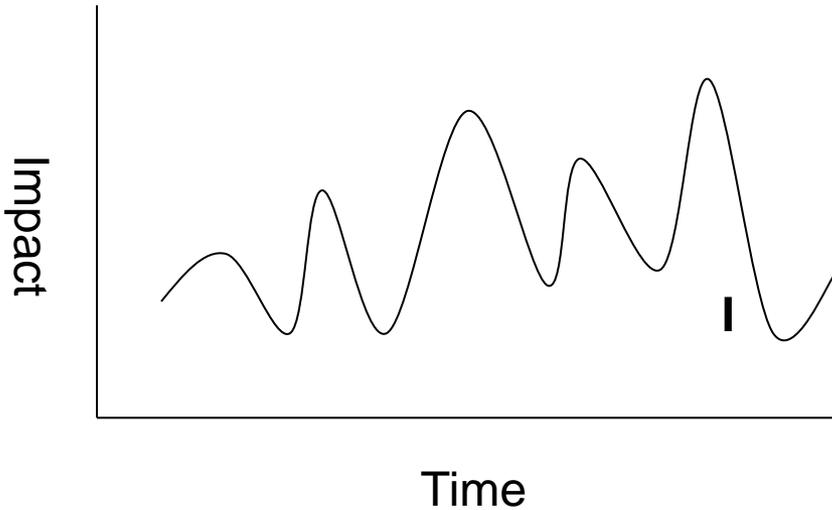
But...

- What if the shape of the impact trajectory curve between t_0 and t_1 is not linear?
- On what theoretical or empirical basis do we assume that it is linear?
 - Mostly, I suspect, because of...
 - Organizational/political imperatives; parsimony
- What if there is no consistent, known *or knowable* impact trajectory for a given project?
- Prone to serious attribution errors (Type I and II) if we don't know the answer to this question

How does legal reform work over time? (or, what is its 'functional form'?)







Using a randomization protocol per se does not address this problem...

A historians' sensibility provides both an awareness of the problem and some 'tools' for responding creatively to it

The past as a foreign country

- Historical economics and social history are complements, not substitutes
- But not seen that way in development policy circles; HE (and its underlying assumptions) rule
- Treating the past as we ought to treat a foreign country, a place where they ‘do things differently’
 - Diplomacy and dialogue as our preferred mode of interaction, for simple and complex problems alike
 - ‘Good contests’ as a way to resolve inherent impasses, contrasting interests, assumptions, knowledge claims
 - Setbacks and disappointments are normal
 - Take the other party seriously; keep persisting
 - The basis for forging the content and legitimacy of agreements
 - The ‘right’ answer is whatever is equitably negotiated

Development policy as if social and economic history mattered

- Dynamics of change inherently involved conflict; usually non-linear, clear only ex post
- Content and legitimacy of institutions often forged through this contestation
- Recognize alternative ways of substantiating causal claims
- How institutions were conceived, assembled and implemented in particular contexts – i.e., how their content and legitimacy was forged – is as important for policy as their empirical salience
- If “institutions matter”, then history matters; if history matters, then maybe historians matter.