

Title: The Role of Political Economy in the Development of the Irish Economy: The Debate on Poor Relief for Ireland 1828-1838.

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the debate by contemporary political economists which took place for over a decade prior to enactment of the Irish Poor Law in 1838. The main participants in this debate were Senior, McCulloch, Scrope and Torrens in England, and Whately, Longfield and Butt in Ireland. The paper is based almost exclusively on primary sources, including publications and other papers of the aforementioned and other contemporaries that time has since rendered “minor,” as well as relevant parliamentary papers and other official documents.

Boylan and Foley (1992, 2) argue that political economy was used to preserve the status-quo in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century: ‘claiming to be non-sectarian and non-political, it [political economy] performed a vitally important ideological function for the political and religious establishment in defending existing socio-economic relations, including landlordism, property rights and in attacking trade unions’ (1992, 2).

This paper counters these charges in the context of the debate on poor relief. It concludes that, far from attempting to stifle the development of the Irish economy and protect the Irish Protestant establishment, nearly all political economists engaged in this debate proposed policies which they believed would lead to further industrialisation, a diminution of the power of landlords, and a strengthening of the role of the Catholic church.