

Title: Classical Economics and the Great Famine in Ireland: A Study in Limits

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question Did classical economics play a role in the Irish Famine of 1845-1850? There are two reasons for characterizing this paper as a study in *limits*. First, *laissez-faire* was never more dominant in English history than between 1817 and 1870, and classical economists of that period were influential in shaping English policy regarding the Irish question. Second, the Famine represented the *greatest* crisis in the history of England's relationship with Ireland, and for Ireland it was the greatest social catastrophe in its entire history.

During the Famine, nonintervention was the preferred English government policy as regards food shipments from Irish tenant farmers which were owed English landlords as rent payments and food shipments to the needy in Ireland. Nonintervention meant that the market would be allowed to allocate economic resources not where the need was greatest out of a sense of sympathy, generosity, and benevolence, but where they could be utilized most efficiently and were owed as an obligation in justice.

The racism, elitism, and anti-Catholic sentiments commonplace in England rationalized nonintervention. The Irish themselves were the source of their own miseries and until they became civilized would continue to be plagued by privation. Their own miserable existence was taken as evidence of their personal character shortcomings and justified nonintervention because intervention would only reinforce those shortcomings and lead to the same outcome.

The evidence indicates that it was not sympathy, generosity, and benevolence which were embraced by three leading classical economists (J.S. Mill, Senior, and Jevons), but racism, elitism, and religious prejudice which in turn made nonintervention more acceptable in England both at the time of the Famine and afterwards.