

Malthus, Classical Political Economy, and the Causes of the Great Famine

by Lawrence Frohman

English attitudes towards Ireland and their strategies for solving the economic and social problems of the Irish were shaped by the interaction of two closely related sets of ideas: the population theories of Thomas Robert Malthus and the principles of classical liberal political economy. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Malthus argued that the great majority of mankind was doomed to a life of toil and want because population inevitably grew at a faster rate than the available food supply. Malthus warned of catastrophic famines and epidemics that would befall any people who disregarded this law.

"Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world."

The Great Famine in Ireland has been seen by many as the classic example of a Malthusian crisis whose preconditions were created by the combination of increasing population and the continuous fragmentation of land holdings into smaller and smaller units. However, people who argue this position ignore other factors that led to the Great Famine, especially the history of economic and political relations between Ireland and England and the relationship between Protestant landlords and Catholic tenant farmers. In addition, as the case of England shows, industrialization made it possible to postpone the crisis predicted by Malthus for such an indefinite length of time as to question the predictive value of his theory.

The important question is how a human catastrophe of the dimensions of the Great Famine could happen within the United Kingdom, which at that time was the most prosperous country in the world. The answer to this question is related to the way that Malthus' theory of over-population meshed with the ideas of classical liberal political economic theory, which insisted that the general welfare could best be promoted by giving the greatest possible freedom to the operation of the market and by protecting the sanctity of private property as the foundation of society.

In the first decades of the 1800s, most liberal economic observers attributed the condition of Ireland to a vicious circle in which cultivation of the potato was both the cause and the effect of the population crisis. According to this line of reasoning, the relative ease of potato cultivation degraded the character of Irish farmers by encouraging them to rely for their basic necessities on the bounty of nature, rather than their own effort. It also contributed to over-population which led to the fragmentation of land holdings. This led to further reliance on potato cultivation because it was the only crop that could be viably produced on small holdings.

British policy makers favored agrarian reorganization in Ireland, but there were many obstacles to reform. Any substantial long-term improvement in the standard of living of the Irish peasantry depended on increasing agricultural productivity by consolidating the small, fragmented land holdings into larger farms producing for domestic or export markets and employing wage labor. One problem was that the development of commercial agriculture required the eviction of a substantial proportion of the peasantry from those small holdings which were the only thing which stood between them and starvation. A second problem was that the primarily English absentee landlords, who were responsible for local government administration including providing for the poor, were not interested in reform. Their concern was short-term gain, which meant extracting as much rent as possible from tenants forced to subsist on potatoes.

Economic conditions in Ireland, prior to and during the Great Famine, were exacerbated because of British ideas about the effectiveness and advisability of poor or relief laws. The government feared that if the Irish poor were offered economic assistance without subjecting them to harsh and degrading conditions, it would further

weaken their self-reliance and moral character, which policy makers blamed for the population problem in the first place. The 1834 English Poor Law recognized the obligation of the government to provide the poor with the necessities of life, but it specified that assistance was to be provided within the confines of workhouses under such harsh conditions that only people totally bereft of personal pride or physically unable to support themselves would voluntarily enter. The cardinal principle of the new system was that no person who was receiving public assistance should enjoy a higher standard of living than someone who was supporting him or herself through their own efforts.

The 1838 Irish Poor Law was modeled on the 1834 English law, though the Irish law was more stringent than its English model. The English architects of the law hoped it would accelerate the modernization of Irish society by pressuring potato farmers into seeking better-paying wage labor in agriculture and industry while at the same time providing a meager social safety-net to help evicted subsistence farmers survive the unavoidable transitional crisis. At the same time, the law made poor rates the responsibility of localities in an attempt to force absentee landlords to consolidate and improve their lands in order to raise the funds needed to provide for poor relief.

The commitment of British policy makers to free market, or laissez-faire economics, led to disastrous consequences during the Great Famine. When the potato blight hit in the fall of 1845, the British viewed it as a stroke of divine providence that would force the Irish to finally rationalize land use and agricultural production. The government decided that the best way to meet the joint challenge of the potato blight and reorganizing Irish agricultural was to rigorously enforce the 1838 poor law while increasing pressure on Irish landlords to support the local needy. Moreover, the government was also unwilling to prohibit the export of Irish grain to England. It feared that this would disrupt the free market, drive food prices up, and promote hoarding. Treasury under-Secretary Charles Trevelyn argued that large-scale government intervention in the market would cause more problems than the interventionist policies were designed to correct, while setting British society down the slippery slope toward communism.

Because they uncritically accepted Malthus' theory of overpopulation and free market laissez-faire economics, British policy makers failed to distinguish between addressing the causes of chronic poverty and assisting a population needing immediate relief during a famine. They continued to encourage the self-reliance and industry of the Irish, and were blind, or at least insensitive, to the human suffering caused by their policies.

HIGH SCHOOL LESSON IDEA - Grade Level 10/12

AIM QUESTION: How did 19th century economists view conditions in pre-famine Ireland?

SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS:

World History: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history, and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Geography: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live -- local, national and global -- including the distribution of people, places and environments over the Earth's surface.

Economics: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the U.S. and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and non-market mechanisms.

TEACHER BACKGROUND:

During the 19th century, the new science of economics attempted to describe the economic world and promote possible solutions to economic problems. The Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus was the son of an English gentleman, an economist, and an Anglican clergyman. In 1798, he published anonymously "Essay on the Principle of Population." In this essay, Malthus predicted that human population would always outstrip natural resources. He believed that overpopulation led to competition for survival and that periodic disaster was a law of nature.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are best known as the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848. In the middle of the nineteenth century they were both economists and political activists. They studied the development of capitalist industrial society, tried to understand how the system worked, wrote about their findings, and also organized working-class and radical movements to challenge what they considered an unjust system. Because England was the leading capitalist and industrial nation of the time, Marx and Engels wrote extensively about its economic system. Periodically, they also examined conditions in Ireland and the relationship between England and Ireland. Significantly, in their published works, they appear to disagree. Engels believed that the primary problem facing Ireland was the sub-division of Irish land. Marx believed that problems were related to English policies and that independence was necessary for change to succeed in Ireland.

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect in history and the ability to support conclusions based on an evaluation of evidence through individual and group writing assignments and during group and class discussions.
- Students will demonstrate the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to apply an understanding of economic theory to explain contemporary problems.

MATERIAL: Activity sheets A: What did Malthus predict about the impact of population growth?; B: Marx and Engels discuss conditions in Ireland.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Option A - Read Activity Sheet A section 1 and answer questions 1-3. Option B- Examine headlines on economic issues from today's newspapers.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Could you turn your back on a hungry neighbor? Would you feel differently if the person lived in another part of the country or world? Explain.

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: - Examine Activity Sheet A section 1.

Are the major economic problems facing the world today similar to or different from the problems at the start of the 19th century? Explain.

Key questions about Malthus:

- According to Malthus, what forces lead to the "premature death" of the human race?
- Do you think Malthus believes "the power of population" is a positive or a negative power? Explain.
- What does Malthus mean by the statement: "Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature"

ACTIVITY:

- Examine Activity Sheet A section 2 and 3.

Key Questions about Malthus

- According to Malthus, who is responsible to care for the poor? In your opinion, why does Malthus take this stand?
- What does Malthus believe will happen to the population of Ireland? According to Malthus, what force will create this change?
- If you were a member of the British Parliament and agreed with these statements by Malthus, what policies would you recommend? Why? What would you argue if you disagreed with Malthus? Why?
- Examine and discuss the introduction to Activity Sheet B: Marx and Engels discuss conditions in Ireland. Divide class into two groups. One group reads Engels: The Problem is the sub-division of Irish land. The second group reads Marx: Independence is Necessary for Change in Ireland.

Key Questions:

- What do Marx and Engels believe are the causes of the problems facing Ireland?
- In your opinion, why do they appear to disagree? Who do you agree with? Why?

SUMMARY QUESTION: In your opinion, why do 19th century economists disagree about the causes of the problems that face Ireland?

HOMEWORK: Find a current events newspaper article on an economic problem addressed by either Malthus, Marx or Engels. Explain the economic problem and described possible solutions.

APPLICATION: Economists continue to disagree when they try to explain economic conditions? In your opinion, why do 21st century economists disagree about solutions to contemporary economic problems? Do you think there are solutions to these problems? Explain.

Activity Sheet A: What did Malthus predict about the impact of population growth?

Source: Robert Heilbroner discusses Malthus in his book, *The Worldly Philosophers*, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

The Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus was the son of an English gentleman, an economist, and an Anglican clergyman. In 1798, he published anonymously "Essay on the Principle of Population." In this essay, Malthus predicted that human population would always outstrip natural resources. He believed that overpopulation led to competition for survival and that periodic disaster was a law of nature. As a result of his writings, economics was described as "the dismal science."

1) "Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world."

1- According to Malthus, what forces lead to the "premature death" of the human race?

2- Do you think Malthus believes "the power of population" is a positive or a negative power? Explain.

3- What does Malthus mean by the statement: "Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature"?

2) "[No poor person should expect to receive poor relief from the state] if he cannot get subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if society does not want labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and in fact, has no business to be where he is."

4- According to Malthus, who is responsible to care for the poor?

5- In your opinion, why does Malthus take this stand?

3) In 1808, Malthus wrote an essay for the Edinburgh Review where he specifically discussed economic conditions in Ireland. "Although it is quite certain that the population of Ireland cannot continue permanently to increase at its present rate, yet it is as certain that it will not suddenly come to a stop. . . . Both theory and experience uniformly instruct us that a less abundant supply of food operates with a gradually increasing pressure for a long time before its progress is stopped. . . . (T)he gradual diminution of the real wages of the labouring classes of society, slowly, almost insensibly, generates the habits necessary for an order of things in which the funds for the maintenance of labour are stationary."

6- What does Malthus believe will happen to the population of Ireland?

7- According to Malthus, what force will create this change?

4) In a letter to economist David Ricardo, Malthus warned about the future. "(T)he land in Ireland is infinitely more peopled than in England; and to give full effect to the natural resources of the country, a great part of the population should be swept from the soil."

8- If you were a member of the British Parliament and agreed with these statements by Malthus, what policies would you recommend? Why?

9- What would you argue if you disagreed with Malthus? Why?

Activity Sheet B: Marx and Engels discuss conditions in Ireland

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are best known as the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848. In the middle of the nineteenth century they were both economists and political activists. They studied the development of capitalist industrial society, tried to understand how the system worked, wrote about their findings, and also organized working-class and radical movements to challenge what they considered an unjust system. Because England was the leading capitalist and industrial nation of the time, Marx and Engels wrote extensively about its economic system. Periodically, they also examined conditions in Ireland and the relationship between England and Ireland. Significantly, in their published works, they appear to disagree.

Engels: The Problem is the sub-division of Irish land

1) In 1845, just before the Great Irish famine, Frederick Engels published *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. In this book, Engels blamed pre-famine conditions facing agricultural workers and tenants in Ireland on the excessive subdivision of the land.

"Ireland demonstrates the consequences of overdividing the soil.... In consequence of the great competition which prevails among these small tenants, the rent has reached an unheard-of height, double, treble, and quadruple that paid in England.... When the time comes in the spring at which this provision reaches its end, or can no longer be used because of its sprouting, wife and children go forth and beg and tramp the country with their kettle in their hands. Meanwhile, the husband after planting potatoes for the next year, goes in search of work either in Ireland or England, and returns at the potato harvest to his family. This is the condition in which nine-tenths of the Irish country folks live. They are poor as church mice, wear the most wretched rags, and stand upon the lowest plane of intelligence possible in a half-civilized country..... The cause of this poverty

lies in the existing social conditions, especially in the competition here found in the form of the subdivision of the soil.”

2) While Engels acknowledged religious and national conflicts between England and Ireland, he disputed claims that they were the cause of Ireland’s economic problems.

“From another side comes the assertion that the shameless oppression inflicted by the English is the cause of the trouble... Or the blame is laid on the Protestant Church forced upon a Catholic nation.... (but) this poverty is the result of our social conditions; apart from these, causes may be found for the manner in which it manifests itself, but not for the fact of its existence.

3) Based on his economic analysis, Engels argued that repeal of the Act of Union of England and Ireland would not solve the economic problems facing the people of Ireland.

“From all the foregoing, it is clear that the uneducated Irish must see in the English their worst enemies; and their first hope of improvement in the conquest of national independence. But quite as clear is it, too, that Irish distress cannot be removed by any Act of Repeal. Such an act would, however, at once lay bare the fact that the cause of Irish misery, which now seems to come from abroad, is really to be found at home.”

Marx: Independence is Necessary for Change in Ireland

1) Throughout the 1850s, Karl Marx wrote comparing problems in India and Ireland. He argued that English policies made conditions in both of these countries worse. Marx believed that Irish independence from England was necessary before conditions on the island would improve.

"On the one side you have there a small class of land monopolists, on the other, a very large class of tenants with very petty fortunes, which they have no chance to invest in different ways, no other field of production open to them, except the soil. They are, therefore, forced to become tenants-at-will.... England has subverted the conditions of Irish society. At first, it confiscated the land; then it suppressed the industry by "Parliamentary enactments"; and lastly, it broke the active energy by armed force. And thus England created those abominable "conditions of society" which enable a small caste of rapacious lordlings to dictate to the Irish people the terms on which they shall be allowed to hold the land and to live upon it.”

2) In 1856, Engels wrote a letter to Marx where he described Ireland “as England's first colony .” “Ireland may be regarded as England's first colony and as one which, because of its proximity, is still governed exactly in the old way, and one can already notice here that the so-called liberty of English citizens is based on the oppression of the colonies.... Land became the great object of pursuit. The people now had before them the choice between the occupation of land, at any rent, or starvation.”

3) In 1867, Marx wrote to Engels that political radicals in England should support independence for Ireland.

"The question now is, what shall we advise the English workers? In my opinion, they must make the Repeal of the Union an article of their pronunziamento. This is the only legal and therefore only possible way for Irish emancipation which can be admitted in the programme of an English party.... What the Irish need is:

1. Self government and independence from England.
2. An agrarian revolution. With the best intentions in the world, the English cannot accomplish this for them, but they can give them the legal means of accomplishing it for themselves.
3. Protective tariffs against England. Between 1733 and 1801, every branch of Irish industry flourished. The Union, which overthrew the protective tariffs established by the Irish Parliament, destroyed all industrial life in Ireland . . . Once the Irish are independent, necessity will turn them into protectionists.”

Lesson Ideas and Activities

Explore the causes of hunger in the world today. Collect current events articles about hunger. Use charts to create graphs illustrating the rate of population growth.

Watch and discuss the movie *Distant Thunder* (members.tripod.com/satyajit_ray/xashani.htm) about famine in India during World War II.

Read and discuss the article “People Who Breed People” by Christopher Hitchens, *Vanity Fair* July, 2000.

Check out these websites:

Population Timeline (www.pbs.org/kqed/population_bomb/danger/time.html), World Population (www.undp.org/popin/wdtrends/p98/bp98pwld.htm), Countries Ranked by Population (www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/), and Day of Six Billion (d6b.cas.psu.edu/100people.htm).

- *Dina Bruu and Nicholas Santora*