

10. THE PROBLEM OF THE POOR IN NINETEENTH CENTURY

EUROPE

“amid the lively debate presently taking place in the Netherlands over the drafting of legal regulations for poor relief, the example of Great Britain is ever present; it is used by one advocate as a positive example and by another as a gruesome deterrent.” August Philips (1851)¹

“all the millions spent on trying to halt the destructive ravages wrought by the sea of paupers have accomplished nothing” L.-M. Moreau-Christophe (1851)²

“an opulent nation, powerful because of its industrial genius and its application of the miracles of mechanical production, has returned, in order to occupy its indigents, to crude instruments of barbarism and condemns its criminals as well as its poor people to be tortured like ancient slaves” Eugène Buret (1840).³

INTRODUCTION

We saw above the great increase in output per person that occurred in Britain in the Industrial Revolution, and the rapid spread of the new techniques of the Industrial Revolution to other countries in Western Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Output per person nearly doubled in Britain in the Industrial Revolution, and has increased nearly tenfold in Western

¹ August Philips, De Engelse Armenwetten naar inhoud en werking geschetst, p. 59. Quoted in Frances Gouda, Poverty and Political Culture: the Rhetoric of Social Welfare in the Netherlands and France, 1815-1854 (1995), pp. 155-9.

²L.-M. Moreau-Christophe, Du Problème de la Misère et de sa Solution Chez les Peuples Anciens et Modernes (1851), Vol. 3, p. 192. Quoted in Gouda (1995), p. 163-4.

³ Eugène Buret, De la Misère des Classes Laborieuses en Angleterre et France, Vol. 1, Ch. 5.

Europe since 1700. Yet one of the most acute social problems that occupied the attention of politicians and social reformers in England, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, and other western European countries in the mid-nineteenth centuries was the problem of the poor, and this problem continues to be a perennial issue in the politics of modern day western Europe (and indeed of the USA). Poverty existed in all pre-industrial societies in Europe, but for some reason the problem came to be regarded as more desperate and intractable just as these countries were at long last experiencing significant economic growth. Poverty for centuries had been relieved in all these countries by a combination of private charity and some public assistance. But in the mid-nineteenth century there were debates about reform of poor relief in many countries. The central question in these debates was “how can the poor be aided in such a way as will not induce idleness nor place an intolerable burden on taxpayers?”

The first country to attempt major reform of the poor relief system was England in 1834 when the New Poor Law was instituted. We discuss below why these major reforms were instituted in 1834. The English reform was followed by a reform of the Irish poor law in 1838 along English lines. These reforms served as a model for continental reform debates in part because of the power and prestige of the British economy. As Gouda notes:

Because of the preeminence of England in nineteenth-century Europe, academics and public officials were inclined to look towards the English experience for guidance (Gouda (1995), p. 146).

The debates on reforming the poor laws in these countries were also driven by an apparent worsening of the problem of poverty. The numbers on poor relief in both France and the Netherlands did rise considerably in the mid nineteenth century, as Table 10.1 shows. The table shows the total numbers receiving poor relief of some form, and the number “indoors” meaning

Quoted in Gouda (1995), p. 164.

lodged in some institution for the poor. Population in each country was growing at the rate of nearly 1% per year in this period, so that the rise in the population of the poor as a percentage of the total population was smaller than the absolute numbers would suggest. But it was still the case that in the Netherlands by 1850, with a total population of only 3.07 million, 14.4% of the population was receiving some form of poor relief, compared to only about 7.5% in 1820. In France the proportion receiving poor relief was never so high. But it still rose from about 4% in 1832 to 5% in 1850.

TABLE 10.1: NUMBERS ON POOR RELIEF, FRANCE AND THE NETHERLANDS,
1820-1850

year	Netherlands		France	
	indoor	all	indoor	all
1820		165,000		
1832		230,000	500,000	1,200,000
1846	27,000	495,000	593,000	1,516,000
1850	19,000	443,000	600,000	1,600,000

Source: Gouda (1995), pp. 76-78,

As we shall see the English poor law tried to harmonize two conflicting objectives:

- (1) Ensure that all who are genuinely needy get a minimum provision of income.
- (2) Ensure that all who are capable of work do so, and that all who have other sources

of income use these for their support.

Ultimately both the Netherlands and France rejected the radical English solution. Instead

they tried various schemes designed to make the poor productive - pauper factories and agricultural colonies - which all produced little of value and had to be heavily subsidized. The problem of the poor, as we have seen in recent years, was a particularly intractable one.

What is interesting about this mid nineteenth century debate is how similar to the debate being conducted in the United States now about “reinventing welfare” and “ending welfare as we know it.” The same issues of how to distinguish the truly needy from the lazy or improvident arise, as do the ideas of somehow making the poor productive by either employing them on public work (as the current reform of welfare in New York City calls for) or by providing them the incentive to work.

THE REFORM OF THE POOR LAW IN ENGLAND

Starting in the 1790s there was an intensified debate in England about the problem of the poor and the intolerable burden they placed on taxpayers. In England the poor law that operated until 1834, the “Old Poor Law” was set in place by statutes promulgated by the central government under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.⁴ Under the old poor law each parish was legally responsible for its own poor. If someone became destitute they could apply to the overseer of the poor of the parish for relief. If they were rejected they could appeal to the local magistrates who had the power to order the parish to provide relief. The Elizabethan acts called for relatively harsh treatment of the poor: beggars were to be whipped, the able bodies set to work, and the “impotent” poor aided in almshouses. The parishes typically found that the

⁴ As a result of population growth wages fell in the late sixteenth century (Elizabeth reigned from 1558 to 1603) creating a problem of poverty in this period. Acts setting up the poor law were issued in 1572, 1597, and 1601.

cheapest way of providing poor relief was by granting the poor a subsistence allowance in money, and letting them live in their own homes or the homes of their children if they were elderly. Parishes would try to find employment for the able bodied by making them work repairing the parish roads, or by asking each farmer to employ a certain number of laborers. But often, especially outside the harvest season, there was simply no work available and the poor would receive relief without having to work. Parishes in England were empowered by regulations established in 1722 to build workhouses (sometimes called “houses of industry”) where the poor could be put to work picking rags, or spinning yarn. But few chose to do so. By 1834 of 15,535 parishes in England a mere 200 had workhouses. The others found it was cheaper to provide outdoor relief and leave the poor to get on with their lives.

Another factor mitigating against use of the workhouse was the small size of the average parish. Of the 15,535 parishes in 1831, 1907 had fewer than 100 inhabitants, and 4,774 had between 100 and 300 people only. The small size of many parishes meant that the overseer could exert relatively effective supervision of the poor even when they were allowed their independence.

The old poor law seems to have operated with little controversy till the late eighteenth century. But from the 1790s to the 1830s it was a matter of great debate and discussion. This debate had both practical and intellectual origins. The practical origin was that the amounts parishes had to levy on landowners to relieve the poor climbed greatly after the 1780s. Thus the total payments in England and Wales for the support of the poor rose as follows:

year	Payments for poor	GNP
1784	£2 million	£144 million
1802	£4.1	£260
1812	£9.7	£348

1831

£7.0

£340

While the total bill for support of the poor rose by 350% between 1784 and 1831, in 1831 it was still only about 2.1% of national income, since both population and prices increased between 1784 and 1831, up from about 1.4% of GNP in 1784. 2.1% of GNP spent on poor relief did imply, however, that 8-10% of the population were in receipt of poor relief in 1830. The problem, further, was that each parish was responsible for supporting its own poor and the poor were heavily concentrated in the rural areas of the south of England. Thus, for example, the parish of Westoning in Bedfordshire covered only 1,350 acres (about 3 square miles). But the cost of maintaining the poor in 1831 was £1,044. Since land rents on average at this time were only about £1.5 per acre, this implied that the local tax for the poor was taking about half the rental value of the land.

Since from 1796 on the poor rate had been a heavy burden on many landowners, and by the 1830s land rents if anything were falling while poor rates showed no sign of decrease, by 1830s it seemed there was no end in sight to the heavy burden of the rural poor.

The intellectual origin of the debate on the poor was the emerging discipline of Political Economy. Malthus's Essay on a Principle of Population, in particular, was very influential. Various earlier writers such as Rousseau, Godwin, and Condorcet had argued that the problem of poverty could be solved by goodwill and education. Malthus argued that poverty had its roots not in the social structure or political institutions, but in the constant tendency for populations to outrun the means of subsistence, which was only checked by poverty driving up the death rate. The only thing that could alleviate poverty was to persuade the poor to voluntarily limit their numbers. Malthus argued that the existing poor law, because it provided more income to poor

families as their size increased, gave no incentive to the poor to limit their families, and would thus immiserate the whole society. Malthus's arguments formed the basis of intellectual arguments against the old poor law, and were incorporated into the reforms of 1834.

Followers of Malthus criticized the poor law on two grounds. The first was the above population argument, which was that the existing poor law tended to encourage the reproduction of an impoverished class. The system also allegedly "demoralized" the laboring classes because the wage received in the unskilled labor market was little if anything higher than the payments under poor relief. Thus there was little incentive to work hard since being made unemployed was no longer a material penalty. There was correspondingly little incentive to search for a job if made unemployed, especially if it involved uprooting your family and moving elsewhere in the economy. Thus the poor law was "a bounty on indolence and vice" and "a universal system of pauperism."

The most influential member of the Poor Law Commission set up in 1834 to examine the workings of the old poor law was Nassau Senior, Professor of Political Economy at Oxford University. Senior wrote the whole of the report of the commission, organized the inquiry that produced the report, and then lobbied vigorously to get Parliament to implement the proposals.

The Poor Law Commission called for a radical overhaul of the poor relief system to eliminate the two problems that the disciples of Malthus had focused upon. The incentives problem was seen as having two components. The argument was that the existing system offered benefits that were attractive enough that those who could find work preferred instead to declare themselves indigent. But further it offered an attractive enough set of benefits that the incentive to work hard was reduced for unskilled workers who had jobs.

The argument here would be the following. Suppose an unskilled worker gets a wage w ,

and has to decide how much effort to offer on the job, e , where e lies between 0 and 1. Suppose also that the workers chance of getting fired is $p(e) = 1-e$. That is if the worker offers full effort $e=1$, they will retain their job. If they offer an effort less than 1 their chance of being detected and fired is $1-e$, so it is higher the lower the effort offered. Suppose also that the worker who is fired gets given a wage w_0 through the poor law system. Suppose finally that the expected satisfaction of the worker can be indexed by $U(e, w, w_0)$ where

$$U(e, w, w_0) = (1-p)(w-ae) + p w_0 .$$

What level of effort will workers choose to maximize their expected satisfaction? The answer is

$$e^* = \frac{w - w_0}{2a} .^5$$

Thus the higher is the level of poor relief, w_0 , the lower is the effort level on the job. And if $w_0 = w$, then workers all shirk completely.

The Poor Law Commission report concluded that the poor relief system thus had to ensure that the poor law allowance, w_0 , was much less than the market wage for unskilled workers, w . This they called the principle of “less eligibility.” At a minimum the utility derived from being on welfare had to be less than that from working. But since a small gap between these two utilities would induce shirking on the job, the gap had to be made as large as possible.

The problem the Poor Law Commission faced was that the wages of agricultural workers in the rural areas of southern England, where most of the unemployment was, were very low. Some workers were getting as little as £24 per year, or 9/- per week. Now 9/- would only be enough to provide workers with the most meager of food and lodging. Their diet consisted mainly of bread, with a little bit of low quality meat or more often just meat fat (dripping) to dip the bread in. They lived in miserable one or two room hovels, and went to bed whenever it was

⁵ This answer is found by differentiating $U(e)$ with respect to e , and then setting that derivative equal to 0.

dark since they were too poor to afford candle lighting. Thus the Poor Law Commission faced a problem in that unless they deliberately starved the poor, how could they make their conditions worse than those who were in employment? The minimum demands of decency in the treatment of the poor were if anything pushing for conditions better than they could get by working.

The solution adopted, and applied in a bizarrely systematic fashion, was to provide the poor with a diet that was nutritionally adequate, and housing that was clean and warm, but to otherwise deliberately arrange the conditions of life of the pauper to be so regimented and monotonous so that the satisfaction from being on poor relief fell well below that even of those working for miserable wages.

Thus under the New Poor Law the poor were not to receive “outdoor” relief as before, where they received just a money stipend each week. For then their conditions would not be much worse than unskilled workers. Instead the poor were to be housed in a workhouse under supervision. And the regime in the workhouse was to be so harsh as to discourage all but the truly indigent from applying for relief. The Poor Law Board established by the New Poor Law thus laid down six basic diets that all workhouses were to conform to. These diets rotated the same basic bland meals in endless monotony week after week. No alcohol was allowed, at a time where beer drinking was a staple of the diet of any well to do workman. The inmates were not allowed to receive any presents of food while they were in the workhouse. The Poor Law Board also initially specified that there were to be no special meals on Christmas day and other feast days unless they were paid for by private charitable donations. The workhouse also had a strict regime of hours, the same for each day: wakeup was at 5 am in summer, 7 am in winter, and bed was at 8 p.m. in all seasons. There were 10 hours of labor six days a week all through the summer, and six days of 9 hours in the winter. Since it was often impossible to find any

work for the inmates which had an economic value they were often put to such low value tasks as rock breaking. In some cases they were even put to work on treadmills for no other reason than to keep them at hard labor.

One hour of leisure was allowed each day. The meals were at the same times each day. At no time were inmates to be allowed out of the workhouse, except for very special reasons. No visitors were allowed without the permission of the master or matron, and then the visit was to be conducted in the presence of the master or matron. There were to be no card games, no gambling, and no smoking indoors.

Further the workhouse inmates were to be divided into categories, each of which was to be strictly segregated: the initial plans called for the creation of seven categories of inmates, but later the major divisions used were those of the elderly and impotent, able-bodied males, able-bodied females, and children. Husbands and wives were thus separated in the workhouse, as were parents and their children. The poor were to be given no chance to reproduce in idleness. The initial plans called for separate workhouses for each of these groups, but the Poor Law authorities found this prohibitively expensive so that mostly they contented themselves with constructing large central work houses which had physically separate sections for each category of the poor. Figure 10.1 shows an example of the imposing new workhouses which were constructed.

A strict system of discipline was used to enforce these many workhouse rules. Disobedient paupers could be confined to a cell for up to 24 hours. They might also be placed on a bread and water diet for up to 48 hours, and made to wear special clothes for the same length of time. Indeed in the early years of the New Poor Law some workhouses went so far as to make mothers of illegitimate children wear a special distinctive uniform.

Since the whole point of the harsh regime was to make the workhouse undesirable for all but the most wretched and most hopeless the one freedom inmates were allowed was the freedom to leave at any time. Adult males, however, had to take all their family members with them when they left. The workhouse would also accept anyone who declared themselves indigent at any time. The whole idea of the workhouse was that only those who were truly needy would ever think of applying for the help. That was why the workhouse was referred to as “the workhouse test.” Part of its job was to ensure that only those truly in need ever applied for relief.

Why was the workhouse designed to treat the elderly, who were beyond working, in such a cruel fashion also? The answer here is that the New Poor Law saw the poor as falling into two groups - the “deserving poor,” those poor through no fault of their own, and the “undeserving poor”, those poor because they had spent all their earnings and made no provision for sickness and old age. In particular the authorities worried about who would take care of the elderly. If the workhouse were too comfortable for them, then there would be little incentive for anyone to save for their old age, and also little incentive for their children to take care of them. Thus there was a debate over whether widows with children should be forced into the workhouse. Widows were regarded by many as the epitome of the “deserving poor,” brought to their state not by any moral turpitude but by the vagaries of life. Yet if widows were allowed relief outside the workhouse there would be reduced incentive for low wage workers to join sickness and death societies which provided insurance against just such eventualities.

Thus the principle of the workhouse test represented the systematic application of a simple economic argument to a point that seems bizarre. The harsh conditions of the New Poor Law regime certainly did excite much unfavorable public reaction. 350 new workhouses were built between 1834 and 1839, but they were frequently met with great opposition by the poor

themselves, and also by laborers in regular employment. When construction began riots were not uncommon, and a number of the new workhouses were burned down. In other cases the new structures had to be guarded by militia as they were being built to stop the poor tearing them down. There were also attacks on the property of the guardians of the poor, the local officials responsible for enforcing the new laws. Hay and corn ricks were burned, cows were stabbed, fences were breached to allow cattle to trample the corn, and farm buildings were set afire. Charles Dickens protest novel Oliver Twist, published in 1837, was set in part in a workhouse. A political pamphlet published in 1836 by the Tories (ironically the ancestors of the modern day British Conservative Party), then the party of opposition to the Whigs (now the Liberals), who passed the New Poor Law legislation, asks:

Why should the Whigs raise up their Prisons high
With gloomy fronts, and walls that reach the sky;
Are such dark Dungeons to immure a band
Of Rogues and Swindlers that infest the land?
“No!” some cry - “They are for one crime more
The crime of being old, infirm, and poor”

The workhouse test is easy to understand given the economic logic that impelled the reform. But a second notable feature of the reform was the removal of control of the treatment of the poor from the local parishes where they lived to the central Poor Law Board appointed by Parliament. Indeed local authorities at the parish level often opposed the imposition of the New Poor Law rules. Given that the tax burden was imposed locally, and that it was a significant burden on property owners, why was there this local opposition? In the north of the country, in areas such as Lancashire and Yorkshire, the reason was that the poor were relatively few, and the local wages were higher so that there was little incentive to go on poor relief unless you were truly needy. Indoor relief was more expensive per person than outdoor relief. Thus in 1860 it is estimated that the respective costs of indoor and outdoor relief per person relieved were:

outdoor	£2.5 - £5.5
indoor	£5.5 - £20.0 .

The reform thus seemed expensive and unnecessary to parishes in the north.

But the law was also opposed by many parishes in the rural south where the problem the Poor Law was based on, the small difference between the conditions of the working poor and those on outdoor relief, was most evident. These parishes had after all been using the system of outdoor relief for years. Had they wished they could already have built workhouses and enclosed their local poor (though the New Poor Law made this cheaper by combining parishes in Poor Law Unions which would construct one larger cheaper central workhouse). Part of the opposition of the local parish authorities in the south may have stemmed from fear of the possible actions of the poor and local laborers if the New Poor Law was imposed. Others have ascribed darker motives. It is argued that the local landowners were often obliged to at least appear generous to the poor by social pressure. Since parishes were small landowners worshipped in the same church as the poor, and the laborers in the parish had often worked for the families of landowners for generations. Since the landowners controlled the parish vestry, which determined local poor law policy, they thus found it hard to pursue harsh policies against the poor locally. But by voting in Parliament for a tough centralized poor relief policy they could effectively bind themselves at the local level, while being able to maintain that they were opposed to the new measures. It is certainly the case that the local poor relief unions often voted for measures which the minutes of their meetings reveal they fully hoped and expected would be overturned by the central Poor Relief Board.

It is not clear how effective the New Poor Law was in correcting the evils that the 1834 Poor Law Commission perceived. Certainly the fraction of the population receiving poor relief

did decline after the introduction of the new law. Thus,

Year	% of Population on Poor Relief
1840	7.7%
1880	2.9
1914	1.8

But in actual practice the number of the poor forced into the workhouse after 1834 was always a minority. These numbers per thousand of the population were,

Year	Indoor	Outdoor
1840	11.0	69.0
1880	9.3	22.9
1914	7.0	10.6

As can be seen a majority of the poor until 1914 were receiving the traditional outdoor relief.

Given the great growth of wages in the British economy between 1840 and 1914 it is not clear if the cause of the great decline in those receiving poor relief was the rigors of the New Poor Law, or was just the general rise of wages. The numbers of poor were always smaller in the richer north of the country in the early nineteenth century.

We have seen above the explicit logic that drove the introduction of the New Poor Law. Many historians have argued that these intellectual arguments were merely the representation of deeper underlying social forces. But they disagree as to what these deeper social currents were. One group argues that the New Poor Law arose because of changing attitudes to the poor. As a result of the Industrial Revolution cities were growing bigger, and the ties that bound communities together were loosening. The poor were no longer the neighbors and dependants of the rich and the middle classes as in the traditional rural villages. There was an increasing social

distance between taxpayers and the poor that received the benefit of those taxes. The Poor Law Commission was thus just the intellectual front that crystallized the growing social gulf between the haves and the have nots.

Other historians have argued that the New Poor Law is a creation of the reform of the British political system in 1832. The Parliamentary reforms extended the franchise for voting for Parliament to a larger group of property owners, and reduced the weight of traditional rural constituencies. The voters newly represented were the new capitalist classes emerging in Britain as a result of the Industrial Revolution. These newcomers were interested not in the traditional social obligations of wealth, but in further improving their economic position. The New Poor Law thus represented the interests of the new class of voters, and took a centralized form only as a way of allowing local officials to escape some of the opprobrium that was attached to these harsh measures.

Finally some historians accept that there was a real underlying economic problem. The real wages of agricultural laborers in the south of England had stagnated all the way from 1770 to 1830, despite the rise in incomes in general in the economy. Yet workers remained in rural parishes despite the prospect of income gains from migrating to London, or to the new industrial areas of the north. There was thus a real economic problem of a declining margin between the market wage for unskilled rural workers and the minimum amounts outdoor poor relief could offer.

THE IRISH FAMINE, 1846-9 – DID IRELAND DIE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY?

In 1846 Britain, the richest country in the world, was united in a political union with Ireland which had a wage level only about half of that of Britain. In Britain itself there had not been a major famine in at least 250 years, and no famine with any appreciable fatalities since 1315-17 (it is estimated that about 10% of the population of England died in these terrible years where rains caused three harvest failures in a row all across northern Europe). Yet in 1846-9 in Ireland, which is less than 30 miles from Britain, 1 million out of 8.5 million people died. This would be equivalent in the modern USA to the death by famine of 30 million people. And indeed most of the modern famines in the headlines have killed far fewer people in total and numbers, and even fewer as a percentage of the population. Thus the Bangladesh famine of 1974 killed 26,000, the Sahel famine of 1973/4 killed about 100,000, and the famine in western Sudan in the 1980s killed fewer than 100,000. Further most of these modern famines are associated with war and the breakdown of civil order, while in Ireland there was peace and calm. While about 1 million died in the Irish famine, another 1 million emigrated in the famine years, leaving Ireland with a population in 1851 of only 9.5 million people. Large migrations also occurred within Ireland as the poor moved to towns such as Dublin in search of work.

Another odd feature of the Irish famine was its length. People were still dying from the effects of the famine in 1850, 5 years after it had begun. Modern famines, in contrast, have rarely lasted for longer than a year.

The immediate trigger of the famine in Ireland was the potato blight which reached Ireland in 1845. The potato had unique importance in Irish agriculture before the famine. Nearly 50% of the Irish population was said to depend on the potato for their livelihood in the

1840s. The total crop was about 12 to 15 million tons, half of which was eaten by people.⁶ In part this was because the amount of land per member of the rural population small in Ireland compared to Britain. Whereas there were 8 acres per person in rural areas in Britain in 1840, there were only 3 acres per head in Ireland. Thus Irish peasants often had very small plots of land. In 1841 45% of Irish farms were less than 5 acres. Yet the potato allowed this population to subsist because the potato, through labor intensive spade cultivation, could produce many more calories per acre than grain crops or pasture.

The blight caused a dramatic and lasting drop in potato yields in Ireland. Net potato yields per acre in 1840 to 1844 were 5.2 tons, which means about 12,584 pounds of potatoes per acre. One acre could thus provide enough calories to provide a very basic sustenance to nearly 5 people for a year. In 1845 the potato yield was only 3.2 tons. In 1846 it fell to only 0.7 tons. The yield recovered in 1847 to a very good 9.4 tons, but very few potatoes had been planted that year since in desperation the starving poor had eaten the seed stock of potatoes. The yields in 1848 and 1849 were again very bad. The plight of the poor in Ireland was made worse by the generally high food prices that prevailed throughout Europe in 1847 because of generally bad harvests and the effects of the potato blight in the Netherlands and Belgium. This made food all the more expensive in Ireland.

Interesting, however, calculations of the total food supplies available in Ireland in the famine period do not suggest that the picture was so bleak as the potato yields alone would suggest. Table 10.2 shows the total number of kilo calories of food products available in Ireland per person per day before and during the famine.

⁶ This implies that in 1845 the average person in Ireland ate 5 lbs. of potatoes per day!

TABLE 10.2: CALORIES OF FOOD AVAILABLE PER PERSON 1840-50

	1840-5	1846-50
Domestic Production:		
Potatoes	2,770	600
Other	1,100	1,440
ALL	3,870	2,040
Imports	-750	+510
Net Availability	3,120	2,550

Table 10.2 suggests that while the number of calories available per person from potatoes declined dramatically, the total calories available per person in Ireland fell much more modestly. Indeed the total decline was only 18%. This was because there was a slight increase in the production of other agricultural products (if land is not used to grow potatoes it can be used for other purposes), and there was a change from food exporting to food importing. Grain was imported for famine relief efforts by the government, and commercial exports of grain declined. Indeed in the famine years the number of calories available in Ireland per capita were enough to sustain everyone in robust good health since even in modern America the consumption of adult males is only about 2,700 calories per day while women consume only about 2,100 each, and children consume less.

The reason for the deaths in the famine was thus not just that there was an extremely small amount of food available. The problem was that what food was available was not getting to the poorest workers. The reason for this was twofold.

First the potato blight dramatically reduced the demand for labor in the Irish economy. When the blight came a large amount of land was transferred from potato cultivation into other uses such as grain or pasture. Thus while there were 2.2 m acres of potatoes in 1845, by 1848 there were only 0.8 m acres in potatoes. These other uses of land used much less labor than potatoes. Thus part of the problem was that there was no employment for the poor after the famine, or employment only at extremely low wages. Wages in Ireland were very low before the potato blight, but the shock to labor demand could only lower them further. Without employment the poor had no income to buy the food that was available. This effect is an instance of a general feature of famines that Amartya Sen has emphasized, which is that famines can have two separate causes. One is the failure of harvests, but the other is a change in the income distribution which makes the poor worse off, and so reduces their power to purchase the food they need. The first round effect of the potato blight on food supplies in Ireland was not as dramatic as the deaths might suggest, but there was also an indirect effect on the demand for labor which further hurt the poorest workers. At the height of the famine Irish farmers were exporting large quantities of animals for slaughter in England. Thus,

Year	Exports of cattle (000)	Exports of sheep (000)	Exports of Pigs (000)
1846	192	259	481
1847	200	324	106
1848	203	256	111
1849	211	241	68

Only the export of pigs declined sharply, because pigs were kept by the poor and fed in part on potatoes. The poor in Ireland were not able to bid away these food exports from English consumers

The second problem in the famine years was the reaction of the British government. Why didn't the government of the United Kingdom, of which Ireland was an important part, step in to prevent the famine deaths?

Initially the famine received very little attention in London, where the United Kingdom Parliament sat. The political scene was dominated in 1845 by two great issues: the repeal of the Corn Laws, which protected British agriculture, and the demands for Irish independence. The initial reports of the potato blight were merely that it had reduced potato yields in some areas. The government, however, took steps to ward off the threat of starvation.

The assumption of the British government from the beginning, however, was that it could not just hand out food to the hungry in Ireland. The New Poor Law, which emphasized relief only in exchange for hard labor and admission to the workhouse had been implemented in even more draconian form in Ireland in 1839. Under the Irish Poor Law it was forbidden to give anyone outdoor relief (even though the majority of the English poor still received outdoor relief). It was felt that because of the lower level of wages Ireland could not afford a poor law system without the most stringent workhouse test. Further under the Irish Poor Law there was no legal

right to poor relief as existed in England. Ireland under the new law was organized into 130 poor law unions, who were each to construct a workhouse. By 1845 on the eve of the famine 118 workhouses had been built, with space for 100,000 paupers. The government took it as an axiom that famine relief would have to be conducted within the framework of the Poor Law system, and with a test being applied to see if people were truly needy or mere malingerers. Thus when local famine relief committees were set up in 1846 they were given grants and loans from the central government only on condition that they would distribute no food until the workhouses were full. Those receiving food outside the workhouse were to perform hard labor in return for their food. Also the wages paid for this labor had to be below those of other unskilled labor in the locality so as not to reduce incentives for those in employment. This meant that the relief wages paid by the local committees were only about 5/- per week, about half the lowest rural wage in England at that time. But the dearth of food in Ireland was driving up prices. Potatoes which normally sold at about 2.5 d. per 14 lbs. were selling for 3.9 d. per 14 lbs. in 1849. Grain prices did not increase much in 1846, since they depended on the European grain market, but by 1847 grain prices were high all across Europe. A wage of 5/- if all spent on bread would buy only 30 lbs. of bread. A laborer engaged in hard work would need about 14 lbs. to subsist. Thus if a worker had a wife and several children the wages paid by the relief boards in 1846 would already have resulted in people being on the edge of hunger. To encourage industry on the part of the relieved workers they were sometimes paid by a piece rate of so many shillings per ton of stone broken.

By early 1847 the full extent of the problem was revealing itself, and it was clear that the temporary measures of 1846 would be insufficient. The potato crop is harvested in October, and the crop of 1846 was so bad that by February 1847 714,000 people in Ireland were receiving

relief. The price of potatoes had risen from the normal 2/- per hundredweight to 7/- or even 12/-. Crowds of starving people were marching on workhouses demanding relief.

As it became clear that the bight was likely to be a lasting problem the government embarked on a second permanent relief operation. This was even more closely tied to the poor relief system. The money to relief the poor, as in England, was to be raised from local property taxes. The local poor law unions were still forbidden to provide outdoor relief, and were instructed to embark on an intensive program of workhouse construction. Thus by 1851 in Ireland an additional 200,000 workhouse places had been constructed, so that there were then 309,000 workhouse places available. In contrast Britain in 1851, with more than three times the population of Ireland, had only about 200,000 workhouse places.

Since initially there were simply not enough workhouse places for all those seeking relief in the interim many poor law unions were forced to grant outdoor relief. And the government in 1847 amended the Irish Poor Law so that the elderly and infirm were instructed to be put on outdoor relief so that more space in the workhouses would be left open for the able bodied. Thus the numbers on relief outside the workhouse remained substantial throughout the famine, despite the attempt to provide more workhouse places. The numbers on relief schemes outside workhouses were:

1847	2,900,000
1848	834,000
1849	784,000
1850	149,000
1851	20,000

The amended Poor Law of 1847 also sought to eliminate what it saw as the long run problem in Ireland, taking agriculture in England as a model. The assumption was that poverty in Ireland was encouraged by the existence of a large body of semi-independent “crofters” who

farmed a few acres of land, and worked as laborers for the rest of their income. The only way to transform Irish agriculture and drive from the land this large body of marginal workers was to eliminate these small holdings. To encourage the consolidation of the land in the hands of large scale capitalist farmers the new Poor Law contained a clause denying relief to anyone holding more than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre of land. Thus to get any relief small holders had to sell up their tenancies.⁷ To encourage consolidation of holdings further the government also placed the burden of relief on local landowners, and insisted that even if tenants did not pay their rents, the landlords still had to pay the poor taxes on land. This gave landlords additional incentive to evict tenants unable to pay rent from land. When tenants were forced into poorhouses to seek relief the landlords thus often seized the property and tore down the cabins they had lived in, so that they became homeless.

The numbers on outdoor relief by the summer of 1847 were massive. In the west of Ireland which was poorer and heavily dependent on the potato almost all the population in some areas were receiving relief. Since the relief was to be paid for by local taxes, this meant that in many areas the taxes were too little to pay for the upkeep of the poor. Supplies of food at workhouses were thus generally meager and irregular. The standard ration adopted was 1 lb. of cornmeal per adult per day, and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. per child. Now a pound of cornmeal is only 1,600 calories. This would have been a meager ration if the beneficiaries were not engaged in labor, but heavy labor increases the calorie demands of people greatly. Thus in the 1860s Irish farm laborers would typically consume about 4,000 calories per day each, as did slaves in the US South circa 1860. The government pursued its policy of requiring work for relief, even though there were 3 million on relief in 1847. In these conditions the food ration was a starvation ration.

⁷ Even though they were technically only tenants, occupiers of land in Ireland had rights to the land at low rents, and so became effectively part owners of the land.

Men inside the workhouse were employed breaking stones, while women sometimes broke stones but more frequently did sewing, spinning, and knitting. Workhouses after 1847 were allowed to purchase farms to train boys under age 16 in farming. But they were forbidden from allowing any of the men in the workhouse from working on these farms, since this would make workhouse life less irksome to them. Work was also demanded of the large numbers on outdoor relief, but there was no way of productively employing most of these people, so most of the work was stone breaking. The paupers were divided into three classes based on their health, and each was given a daily quota of stone to break, or eight hours of work was demanded. Irish landlords asked the government to be allowed to use the labor of the paupers for estate improvements such as drainage schemes, but the government felt that since the landlords locally were responsible for administering the poor relief system there was too much conflict of interest. Thus the poor were mainly employed for road repair or road building, doing such tasks as hauling earth or breaking and hammering stones.

Given that the government did provide relief to all, even though it was meager relief, why did so many die? On the official death statistics the number of deaths attributed to starvation is low: only 21,770 from 1846 to 1851. Most of the recorded deaths are from infectious diseases: 193,000 from fever, 125,000 from dysentery and diarrhea, etc. But death from disease is the normal process in a famine. As people starve their bodies lose the ability to resist disease. Also as people starve they lose the energy to keep themselves and their clothes clean. Thus in Ireland the poor soon sold most of their clothing which had any value, leaving themselves dressed in the same set of rags night and day. They huddled together for warmth in whatever cabin heat was available in. These were ideal conditions for the spread of lice, which spread both typhus and relapsing fever. The lice are also adept at quickly leaving the body of a host which dies, they

quickly detect declines in the body temperature of the host, and seeking a new home. As the search for food got more desperate large bodies of people took to the roads in search of work or relief. They were crowded together in the workhouses. Thus the country was swept by infectious diseases.

Thus the reason for the very high mortality in Ireland in the famine years does appear at least in part to be the adherence to the doctrines of the New Poor Law. The potato blight caused a collapse of labor demand in the Irish economy. The free market wage in Ireland, already lower than in England, would have fallen after the blight. This meant the market wage would be insufficient to keep workers alive and in health. Yet when the government distributed relief it insisted that the conditions of relief be worse than those of the free market so as not to reduce the incentive to work. Thus the government offered a diet that was barely adequate to support basic metabolic functions over a long period of time, but insisted that those receiving relief engage in hard labor. Further it made local authorities spend a large amount of the money raised for the poor in local taxes either looking after people in expensive workhouses, or in building new workhouses. This money otherwise could have been used to improve the food ration received by the poor.

Thus the workhouse test applied in Ireland seemed to have a large hand in killing them. Reflecting this the death rate of those accepted into the workhouses and receiving relief was high. In April 1847 in one workhouse 2.5% of the inmate population died. If this was repeated throughout the year then 130% of people in the workhouse would have died in the course of a year. Thus from 1841 to 1851 in Ireland, 284,000 people died in workhouses under the care of the guardians of the poor. It seems at least partially correct to say, as some did at the time, that “the Irish died from Political Economy.”