A Brief History of The Protestant Reformation, Capitalism & The Irish Potato Famine

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The Great Irish Famine fell during a calamitous time in Anglo-Irish history as a disenfranchised, poverty-stricken Catholic Irish, beholden to absentee landlords, became perilously dependent on the potato for their survival. Containing sufficient nutrients to sustain a human being in reasonable health, the potato radically altered the demographics of Irish society. Confoundedly, it allowed an oppressed people to prodigiously multiply, despite a decrease in the average farm holding and escalating impoverishment.

Population Explosion

Prior to the introduction of the potato in the 16th century, the Irish population stood at 1 million. By the early 18th century, it reached 4 million. On the eve of the Great Potato Famine of 1845, the population reached a staggering 8.1 million souls. Three years later, the population would be reduced by a third – a million succumbing to starvation and another million fleeing for English, Canadian and American shores.

The spectre of rising populations was not isolated to Ireland. Between the 17th and 18th century, France's population increased from 19 million to 28 million, while Britain's population rose from 9 million to 16 million. The agrarian rich lands of Prussia experienced a population explosion more aligned with the Irish experience, their population increasing from 2 million to 9 million.

Throughout the 18th century, much was made of this staggering population rise. The Anglo-Irish satirist and cleric Jonathan Swift, addressing the sprawling overpopulation of Irish destitute more than a century before the catastrophic Irish famine, began his 1729 Modest Proposal:

> "I am assured... that a young healthy child, well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food; whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled..."

Thomas Malthus, another speculative, moralist Protestant cleric, in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, predicted the inevitable culling of millions through vectors of disease and starvation if population growth remained unchecked. To offset such natural disasters, Malthus argued for moral restraint. Yet, despairing that the poor could ever be so swayed, he sardonically advocated against assisting the poor in no less unnerving terms than Swift, arguing instead that in:

> "our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near

> stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations. But above all, we should reprobate specific remedies for ravaging diseases."

To be sure, the bombastic hyperbolae owed much to a stylized Protestant-inspired sermonizing rhetoric. Yet the underlying appeal for moral restraint tied to tenets of the Protestant Reformation, namely, the direct mediation of the self with God, an idea which would eventually dovetail with the secularist Enlightenment ideas of self-determination and individual rights.

This hybridization of spiritual determinism with secularized Enlightenment would further influence economic theory as Adam Smith, in his *Wealth of Nations*, penned a proto-Protestant inspired manifesto that argued for unregulated free markets and lassie-faire capitalism based on rational self-interest and competition.

Without invoking the metaphysical, Smith's theory aligned with Martin Luther's assertion that all Christians served God in their occupations. To quote Luther: "God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid." In so ordaining work in the temporal world as essentially vocational, Luther ended Catholicism's disjunctive split between the clergy and the laity, where in the Catholic Church vocation was tied exclusively to acts beyond common human living and marked by chastity. Deconstructing the monastic life, Luther pointedly warned:

> "If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone, then you should know that that work is not a good work."

Arguably, the rise of the Industrial Age, and with it, a new economy of self-interest inspired capitalism, was facilitated by a radical conceptual shift in the understanding of vocation under the Protestant Reformation. If God commanded the mysteries of the universe, so be it, but there were concerns within the domain of man, namely how he survived and prospered in the temporal world. Smith put it thus in The Theory of Moral Sentiments:

> "The administration of the great system of the universe ... the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country...."

The New Economy Capitalism & Enclosure

In anticipating a shift from the essentialism of Catholic emphasis on the transcendent and acts directed to God alone, toward Protestant self-actualization in the temporal world, Smith

extended Luther's argument for vocations, so that the agency of exchange between men could align with principles of self-interest while simultaneously serving a moral function in promoting compassion and advancing happiness. Essentially, a true Christian could not isolate his relationship with God, speaking only of faith while overlooking his relationship with his neighbor.

Tragically, Ireland was worlds away from this emergent neo-protestant capitalism spreading across Europe. While the creep of *Enclosure Acts* elsewhere ended a serfdom medievalism of tenant farming, reorganizing commerce around industrial cities, Ireland was going in the opposite direction. It experienced an alarming agrarian population explosion.

To the outside observer, Ireland exemplified the antithesis of moral restraint, or it was more politically convenient to conflagrate unremitting birth with Catholicism and Irish ignorance than to seek a deeper understanding of the Irish situation. In effect, the Irish dilemma for the English parliament became less about underlying economics, and more representative of a sectarian, attitudinal divide as protestant self-determinism met the miasma of a wretched, Catholic helplessness.

There were, however, economic realities related to land ownership in Ireland that accounted for the exponential growth of the peasant class and that had forestalled any hope of the Industrial Age gaining footing within Ireland. These realities had their roots in sectarianism.

Reformation Split – The Rise of Sectarianism

In the 16th century, Henry VIII, upon converting to Protestantism, had enacted a decree of plantation whereby Irish Catholic gentry who refused to convert to Protestantism had their lands confiscated and bequeathed to protestant transplants. Plantation had been conceived to institute moral and economic reform. It was to be a partnership or husbandry of sober minds over a raucous peasantry. However, given the continued resistance to English plantation by the Irish peasantry, most landlords simply returned to England and collected rent from their foreign holdings. They became known as absentee landlords.

For much of the 18th century, the English parliament did not possess the political will to chastise the absentee class. Instead, the absentees, to advance their economic stranglehold in Ireland, pushed for the enforcement of the draconian Penal Laws that had been enacted under plantation and aimed at disenfranchising Irish Catholics. A particularly onerous statute penalized any tenant that improved their holding. The penalty was either increased rent or eviction. With the tacit backing of the English parliament, the absentees enforced this penal statute, thus perpetuating unparalleled economic stagnation as the Irish hinterland became a series of isolated Protestant estates amidst a wildness of hills and ancient, rutted roads not suited to the transfer of goods or the advance of commerce and a money economy.

By the mid 19th century, the bulk of Ireland's agrarian population paid their rent by harvesting a grain crop for the landlords that was summarily exported for sale on the foreign exchange. It was the peasantry's singular reliance on the life-sustaining potato that propped up an ever

increasingly arcane economic system that had more in common with the perils of the 11th century than with an emerging Industrial Age.

In 1841, on the eve of the famine and under the pressure of a rising populace, forty-five percent of farms were less than five acres. Increased land hunger would see rises in rents and a further sub-division of land to two-acre holdings, which were eventually divided again into half-acre holdings, the minimal acreage on which to grow a subsistence potato crop to feed a family of six. This land hunger and subdivision of land, sanctioned by the absentee landlords, went in the face of enclosure. But in the interim, it maximized rent.

The infamous filth and squalor of living conditions under such a population explosion only advanced the absentee landlords' case against an ungovernable Ireland and forestalled parliamentary involvement. Sectarianism figured, too, the absentees making it their business to describe the Irish peasantry as simian, feces-flinging yahoos, a term borrowed from Swift's veiled subhuman citizens that were allegories of the Irish, as described in Gulliver's Travels. The lack of moral restraint was all too evident in the mass breeding of a population too reliant on a single crop. It was, in many ways, as Malthus had outlined, his sardonic rhetoric of biblical apocalypse, or calculated genocide eerily aligning with the English parliament's eventual political and economic policies concerning Ireland.

Through the regional famines of the early 19th century, the English parliament had created a decentralized federalist approach to public relief that shouldered the responsibility of almsgiving to regional boards, where neighbor was spiritually responsible to help neighbor. Indeed, relief during the generalized potato failure of 1822 had been administered through a triad of agencies – religious subscriptions from English church sects such as the Quakers, parliamentary funds, and collections from local Irish landlords. Religious subscriptions exceeded government aid, thus setting a precedent for future relief efforts.

This Protestant inspired parsimony, relying on almsgiving by the faithful, would show in the English parliament's avid resolve to not initiate wholesale pubic relief under Irish Famine Relief Efforts of 1845-48. Rather, economic-minded measures were taken. Prime Minister Peel sought to repeal England's 1815 *Corn Laws* that had artificially propped up the price of British-grown grain, arguing repeal was necessary to allow a bereft Irish population the chance to purchase cheap corn.

In truth, the repeal was less motivated by humanitarian concerns for the Irish, but more so by domestic political expediency as Peel moved closer to aligning with a tumultuous struggling working class within England who were agitating against high food prices. In a showdown with the landed class in the House of Lords who benefitted from the *Corn Laws*, Peel broke with his conservative counterparts, abandoning mercantilism for laissez-faire capitalism. In an act of genuine humanity, he did secretly purchase two shipments of Indian corn from America to stave off absolute famine in Ireland. The move cost Peel his job.

With Peel's resignation, the new Prime Minister, John Russell, disavowed Peel's policies toward Ireland, especially the government's procurement of grain from America. He re-committed to free trade and was opposed to interfering with normal commerce, either by importing cheap foodstuffs, or by preventing the export of food from Ireland.

The Wig government went further still in decoupling England from involvement in supporting Ireland. *The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1847* placed full responsibility of providing regional relief for the poor on the Irish landlords. This in turn led to a rash of evictions, spurring the eventual spectre of the coffin ship exodus.

Through all this turmoil, the government remained committed to allowing markets to regulate the price and distribution of foodstuff. The question, however, remained - how would such transactions be negotiated when there were so few established markets for the buying and selling of goods in Ireland, and even less money?

If there is a charge to be leveled against the English parliament, it must begin with this inaccurate assessment of the Irish society and its underlying economy. And yet, to be fair, this zealous application of a quasi-Protestant economic theory to social and political ills was not peculiar to Ireland. Throughout the 18th and 19th century, laissez-faire capitalism had sought to make each accountable for their own actions, eschewing government involvement and firmly placing alms-giving among religiously-minded citizens as a stopgap measure against destitution and starvation. Indeed, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's moral awakening was advanced not through parliamentary acts, but through his personal mediation of the soul with God and in his act of almsgiving to those most immediate to him.

Indeed, as late as 1832, a Royal Commission into the *Operation of the Poor Laws* damningly concluded that existing Poor Laws within England perpetuated a class of subsistence laborers who disrupted the natural laws of supply and demand as employers leveraged this subsistence class to force down wages. In response, efforts were redoubled to ensure that those who entered the workhouse would find conditions worse than the poorest free laborer found elsewhere.

Thus, the appointing of Charles Trevelyan to oversee the Relief Efforts in Ireland fell in line with a Protestant attitude that the poor were not so much in need of economic help as moral re-education. Trevelyan, a moralist evangelical and an ardent laissez-faire advocate, in assuming the role of overseer of the Irish, confided to a colleague that he believed:

> "God has sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson...
> [and it] must not be too much mitigated."

Amid a third year of famine, Trevelyan would zealously enforce the *Gregory Act*, which exempted from public relief anybody who owned more than a quarter of an acre of land. The act all but assured the wholesale relinquishment of lands held by the last holdout of the Irish

peasantry and prompted the great immigration of 1847 as the absentee landlords further enticed the peasantry off the land with paid passages to America and Canada.

The foreign secretary to Ireland, the landed Lord Palmerston, acting on the advice of estate agents, eventually shipped some two thousand of his tenants to Canada aboard ships that one Canadian official compared to conditions on vessels used in the slave trade.

The London Times, in assessing the expediency of the *Gregory Act* during the latter stages of the famine, anticipated a second plantation of Ireland by "thrifty Scot and scientific English farmers, men of means, men with modern ideas..." and further declared:

> "A Celtic Irishman will be as rare in Connemara as is the Red Indian on the shore of Manhattan."

In so saying, one could hear the ominous echo of a Malthusian genocidal endgame.

What one can argue in hindsight is that Ireland's fate lay not solely with the failure of the potato, but that it was tied to a complex social, economic and religious struggle that dated to Henry VIII's break from the Catholic Church in 1533. This sectarian split ultimately marginalized the Catholic Irish, justified the confiscation of their lands under Plantation, and ultimately led to the Great Famine of 1845-48. But perhaps no less significant to the Irish plight was a European-wide Protestant self-determinism that would shape the socio-economics of the Industrial Revolution and set an agrarian Ireland adrift of modernity, bringing her people close to the brink of extinction.