

Eating Green in Ireland, and Brown in Haiti  
March 17, 2008

On St. Patrick's Day in America, people dress in bright green colors, get into high spirits, and then sing sad songs about starvation and injustice. The songs do not kill the party, because the miserable conditions that drove the partiers' ancestors across the Atlantic are no longer a threat in Ireland. But elsewhere, people still face the same hard choice between exile and starvation, most notably in Haiti, just 500 miles from our shores. And this time, we can actually do something to stop the tragedy.

Many of the saddest Irish songs recall the Great Famine of 1845-1849. By 1845 Britain had controlled Ireland for centuries, during which the large British landowners (and a few wealthy Irish ones) had, with government help, pushed Irish peasants into smaller and smaller parcels. Although the Emerald Isle was a fertile country that grew more beef, grain and other food than it needed, most of that food was grown on large estates and exported to Britain. Irish peasants -- the majority of the population -- ate mostly potatoes because that was the only crop they could grow enough of to feed their families on their small plots. So when a fungus killed almost the entire potato crop in 1845 (and again for the next four years), the peasants had nothing to eat.

The British government responded to the famine with measures that saved many lives, but failed to rise to the seriousness of the calamity. Over one million people starved to death or were killed by the diseases of hunger. More than 2 million were forced to flee the island- to places where St. Patrick is honored today. All told, Ireland lost a quarter of its population.

The British government's response fell short, in part, because it rejected life-saving measures if they conflicted with the government's economic theories, especially the primacy of the free market. Food distribution programs refused rations to anyone who could theoretically buy food on the market. This included people physically able to work but unable to find jobs in a collapsed economy, and families with any land- even a quarter acre. The theories did not fill empty stomachs, so people not theoretically poor enough for help starved to death while food sat undistributed in the warehouses.

Meanwhile, the potato blight did not affect other crops, including beef and grain. Ireland continued to be a net exporter of food throughout the famine. Keeping the food in Ireland would have saved lives, but it might have interfered with the free market. So the British kept eating Irish beef and grain, while the Irish starved. Some Irish desperately ate their island's famously green grass: they were found dead, with green stains around their mouths.

A century and a half later, Ireland is now one of the wealthiest and peaceful countries in the world, the product of an economic boom fueled by strong government investment, especially in education and infrastructure. But in Haiti, the same combination of natural disaster and misplaced faith in economic theory is killing people and driving others into exile.

Haiti has been in the news lately, for people eating cookies made of salt, butter and brown dirt to hold off starvation. Like Ireland's Great Famine, Haiti's hunger is part natural disaster, but also partly man-made.

For decades, the World Bank and the Inter-America Development Bank (IDB) propped up Haitian dictators with generous loans. The notorious "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" -- Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier-- received almost half of Haiti's current outstanding loans. The Duvaliers used the money to buy warm fur coats and fast cars, and to fund the brutal *Tonton Macoute* death squads. In return, the international community, especially the United States, received a reliable vote against Fidel Castro in the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

The Haitian people received very little from these loans. Since 1980, when Haiti started receiving the Bank's help in earnest, its per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has *shrunk* by 38.3%. Haiti became the poorest country in the Americas, and one of the hungriest countries in the world. Today, about half of school-age kids in Haiti are not in school. Over half of all Haitians struggle to survive on \$1 a day or less, and life expectancy is in the mid-50's. Many of those who can flee do so, including cities like Boston and New York, that sheltered the refugees from Ireland's famine.

The loans lavished on the Duvaliers and other dictators are now due, so Haiti's elected government is sending almost a million dollars every week to the well-appointed offices of the World Bank and the IDB in Washington. Like Ireland exporting beef while people starved, Haiti is exporting money while people die of poverty.

The World Bank and the IDB are not commercial banks. They are funded by our tax dollars, and were established to fight poverty, not make a profit. Like the British in Ireland, the Banks have their "relief programs" for Haiti, including programs that will eventually forgive a portion of Haiti's debt. But like the British response to Ireland's famine, the Bank programs do not rise to the seriousness of the situation.

The Banks' programs are too late -- they will not provide full relief for months, perhaps years. The Banks started their programs in 1996, but did not admit Haiti until 2007, so Haiti has just started jumping through the many hoops required to receive relief. Like the British declaring the starving Irish theoretically able to work, in 2000 the World Bank declared Haiti theoretically able to pay its debts, and therefore ineligible for its help: "[d]espite being very poor and having a relatively significant external debt level, .... after taking advantage of other sources of debt relief, Haiti's debt .... will be reduced to a sustainable level."

The Banks' programs are too little -- they stop where the requirements of helping poor people conflict with the requirements of the Banks' economic theories. The Banks could simply cancel Haiti's debts, especially those from loans given to dictators, which would immediately make a million dollars a week available for important government programs. But the very institutions that gave generously to the Duvaliers, knowing how the money

was being spent, now demand “accountability” from Haiti’s democratic government before cancelling the dictators’ debts. Accountability means, in part, that the government has an economic plan that satisfies the Banks’ free market theories. Haiti’s plan is not yet available, but the Banks have required other poor countries to demonstrate accountability by slashing public health and education spending. For now, accountability means keeping the \$1 million coming every week, while the citizens of Haiti eat dirt.

The citizens of the United States could put a stop to this injustice immediately. We pay the largest share of the Banks’ costs, and have the largest say in the Banks’ governance. If our leaders made cancellation of Haiti’s debt a priority, the debts would be cancelled.

So this St. Patrick’s Day, as we sing about long-ago starvation and injustice in what is now a wealthy island, let us also think about the current misery in Haiti that we can do something about.

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