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THE MAIL "On Irish Famine"

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FAMINE AND FARMS

Pankraj Mishra asserts that **Ireland's Great Potato Famine** was caused by "Britain's heartlessly enforced ideology of laissez-faire" ("[The Hungry Years](#)," Dec. 10th). In fact, as the historian Stephen Davies explains, though Ireland's Great Potato Famine was caused by British heartlessness, the policies at the root of the famine were quite the opposite of laissez faire.

After defeating James II in 1690, victorious Protestants subjected Catholics to cruel restrictions on land ownership and leasing, causing most of Ireland's people to farm small plots on which they had no incentives to make long-term improvements. Agricultural development stagnated, and the high-yield, nutritious potato became Ireland's dominant crop. Discriminatory measures against Catholics kept far too large a portion of Ireland's population practicing subsistence agriculture into the mid-nineteenth century. This, in combination with over-dependence on the potato, spelled doom when in 1845 that crop became infected with the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*. To make matters worse, Britain's high-tariff Corn Laws discouraged the importation of grains that would have lessened the starvation.

Although the magnitude of Ireland's starvation in the nine-teenth century was not so great as that of China's in the twentieth, the policies that led to it were no more laissez faire than China's.

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