

# Hunger on Trial

## An Activity on the Irish Potato Famine and Its Meaning for Today

By **BILL BIGELOW**

SOMEWHERE BACK IN SCHOOL I learned about the 19th-century Irish Potato Famine: More than a million people starved to death when blight hit Ireland's main crop, the potato. The famine meant tremendous human suffering and triggered a mass migration, largely to the United States.

All this is true. But it is also incomplete and misses key facts that link past and present global hunger. Beginning in 1845, blight did begin to hit Ireland's potato crop, which was the staple food of the Irish poor. But all other crops were unaffected. And during the worst famine years, British-ruled Ireland continued to export vast amounts of food.

The first winter of famine, 1846-47, while as many as 400,000 starved, landlords exported 17 million pounds sterling worth of grain (wheat, oats, and barley), cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry—food that could have fed 12 million people over the winter, twice the number of Irish tenant farmers dependent on potatoes.

According to Thomas Gallagher's book, *Paddy's Lament*, one British steamer alone, the *Ajax*, which sailed from Cork to England during the depths of the famine in 1847, contained: "1,514 firkins of butter, 102 casks of pork, 44 hogs-heads of whiskey, 844 sacks of oats, 247 sacks of

wheat, 106 bales of bacon, 13 casks of hams, 145 casks of porter [beef steak] ... 8 sacks of lard, 296 boxes of eggs, 30 head of cattle, 90 pigs, 220 lambs, 34 calves, and 69 miscellaneous packages." As the Irish poor starved.



*In the 1840s, English newspapers brought a certain tourist mentality to reporting on the plight of the Irish poor, offering sketches full of both pathos and mockery, like this one drawn by a visiting English artist for the Illustrated London News.*

Courtesy of Views of the Famine

In approaching the potato famine in my global studies class, I wanted students to see that hunger is less a natural phenomenon than it is a political and economic phenomenon. In 19th-century Ireland, food was a commodity, distributed largely to those who had the means to pay for it. Like today, the capitalist market ruled, and commerce trumped need. According to the Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First, “Enough food is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person a day worldwide: two and a half pounds of grain, beans, and nuts, about a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk, and eggs.” And yet, according to the organization Bread for the World, 852 million people in the world are hungry, and every day 16,000 children die of hunger-related causes. The main issue was and continues to be: Who controls the land and for what purposes?

## Hunger Guilt

I designed a trial role play to highlight the “crime” of famine and to encourage students to reflect on responsibility for that crime. The Irish Potato Famine lends itself to this teaching strategy, as students could plainly recognize the enormity of the famine, but the causes for the Irish suffering were not self-evident and required more consideration. [For examples of the trial role play format, see “The People v. Columbus, et al.” in *Rethinking Columbus*; “The People v. Global Sweatshops” in *Rethinking Globalization*; and “The Case of Cultural Destruction,” online at <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/RGLak.shtm>.] I wrote five detailed “indictments” (see box): British landlords, Irish tenant farmers, the Anglican Church, the British government, and “Political Economy”—the system of colonial capitalism.

This last role requires some explanation for students, because unlike the others, it is not a specific group of humans: It is a system of ownership, production, and distribution. But asking students

to think systemically—reflecting on how the “rules of the game” reward and punish particular behaviors—is a key aim of my global studies curriculum. I don’t want to dehumanize responsibility for injustice, but I want students to look beneath the surface to try to account for why people make the choices they do, and not to rely on glib explanations like “greed.”

Each group was charged with the same crime, but for different reasons:

*You are charged with the murder of one and a half million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.*

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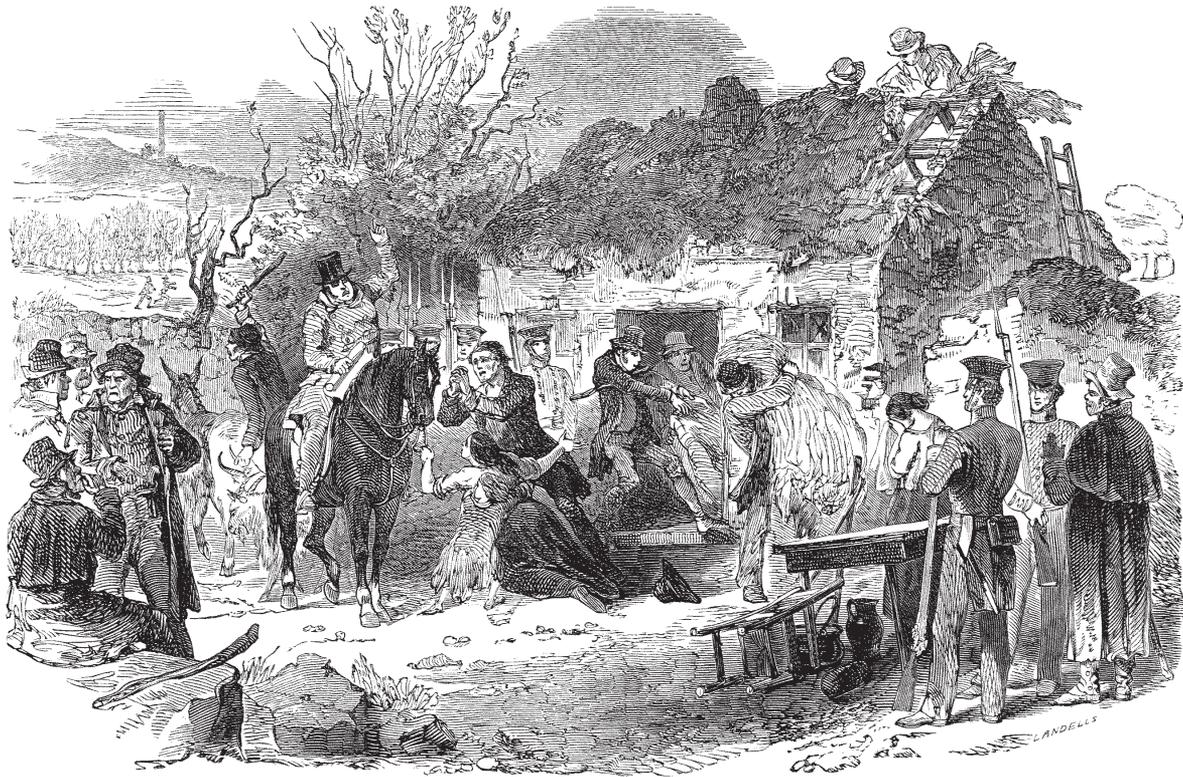
*Students come to see that hunger is less a natural phenomenon than a political and economic one.*

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## Role Play Set Up

I used this role play with my 11th-grade global studies classes at Franklin High School in Portland, Ore., as part of a broader unit on colonialism and the history of global inequality [see chapter two of *Rethinking Globalization*, “Legacy of Inequality: Colonial Roots”]—but it could also be used in a U.S. history course, looking at the roots of Irish immigration to the United States. One reason I appended a short unit on British colonialism in Ireland to this unit is because I wanted my classes of largely working-class European American students to see that colonial exploitation affected “white” people, too—although “white” deserves quotation marks because the British constructed the Irish as a separate race from themselves [see Noel Ignatiev’s book, *How the Irish Became White*].

I opened the unit by bringing to class a potato—an extraordinary food contribution from Native America to the rest of the world. I told students that the word potato comes originally from the Taíno word, *batata*, for what we know today as the sweet potato. The Incas in



Courtesy of Views of the Famine

To support the famine relief effort, British tax policy required landlords to pay the local taxes of their poorest tenant farmers, leading many landlords to forcibly evict struggling farmers and destroy their cottages in order to save money.

South America had cultivated more than 3,000 varieties of potato, ingeniously working out a way to freeze-dry potatoes to make storage and transportation easier; Incan freeze-dried potatoes could be stored for up to five years. An acre planted in potatoes produces twice as many calories as an acre planted in wheat, requires less labor to tend, is less prone to damage from storms, and produces less tooth decay. Its introduction to Europe led to a population boom.

I explained to students that potatoes would be at the center of a role play that examined British colonialism in Ireland. Because there were so many poor people in Ireland—seven out of every eight people on the island—and because they had so little land, the Irish poor relied on the potato. But beginning in 1845, they began to notice the arrival of blight. It turned the potatoes black, gooey, and bad smelling. But the blight afflicted only the potato crops. There was no drought, and three quarters of Ireland’s cultivable land was planted in crops other than potatoes, so there was no need for anyone to go hungry.

Before we began the trial, students read excerpts from chapter five of *Paddy’s Lament*, watched parts of the PBS video *The Irish in America*, and listened to Sinéad O’Connor’s haunting version of the song, “Skibbereen,” a mother’s expression of grief offered to her son about why she left Ireland, with verses like:

*Oh, son, I loved my native land, with energy  
and pride  
'Til a blight came over on my prats, my  
sheep and cattle died,  
The rent and taxes were so high, I could not  
them redeem,  
And that’s the cruel reason why I left old  
Skibbereen.  
Oh, it’s well I do remember, that bleak  
December day,  
The landlord and the sheriff came, to drive  
us all away  
They set my roof on fire, with their cursed  
English spleen  
And that’s another reason why I left old  
Skibbereen.*

I wanted to humanize the effects of the famine, but at the outset I tried not to offer any material that explored its causes. Thus, I saved Sinéad O'Connor's hip-hop-influenced song "Famine," from *Universal Mother*, until the conclusion of the role play.

After introducing students to some of these voices of the famine, I reviewed the charges that confronted the class and then divided students into five groups representing the defendants and a sixth for the jury. Each indictment "role" detailed the specific charges against the group but also indicated the outlines of a possible defense. I distributed packets of all the roles to each group. Students were free to read only the role for their group or, if they wanted more evidence on each group, they could read the entire packet. Their responsibility was to fashion a defense to their group's indictment. They could plead guilty, but in their defense, they had to accuse at least one other group. The jury received all the roles and was responsible for preparing at least three pointed questions for each of the defendant groups.

After preparing their defenses, students sat in a large circle for the trial, each defendant group sitting together. I played the prosecutor and passionately delivered the charges against the first defendant group. Immediately following presentation of the charges against a group, members of that group defended themselves and accused other groups. The jury posed questions to the group on the hot seat, and then I opened the floor to other groups who could also question the defendant. We repeated the process until all groups were charged, had defended themselves, and had been questioned. [Full instructions for teaching the trial are at [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/20\\_04/inst204.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/20_04/inst204.shtml).]

The aim of the trial is not to lead students "Law and Order"-like to some definitive guilty party for the Irish Potato Famine—although I do want them to recognize that the *potato* is not guilty and *nature* is not guilty. I hope instead to nurture a pattern of questioning: Who holds a

society's wealth and power? What determines how resources are used? What human-created institutions and behaviors are at the root of suffering? Too often, the curriculum promotes the notion that we all share a "national interest," as if our students and the CEO of Exxon lived in the same family. But countries are not families, as Howard Zinn says often; and it miseducates students to suggest that they are. Societies are stratified, especially by race and class (and by immigration status). "Ireland" didn't starve; the poor of Ireland starved—needlessly.

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Helping students think clearly about the past can equip them to think clearly about the present. As in Ireland 160 years ago, hunger is rampant today. And like 160 years ago, the cause has little to do with genuine scarcity. If one aim of the

curriculum is to help students imagine solutions to social problems, then such imagination needs to begin with an eyes-open analysis of the root causes of those problems. ■

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Illustrations in this lesson are from the Views of the Famine website: <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/staylor/FAMINE/>



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# British Landlords

**INDICTMENT: YOU ARE CHARGED with the murder of more than a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.**

— You are directly responsible for the terrible famine resulting from the potato blight. You owned the land that the Irish peasants worked. When the potato crop failed, you had a choice: You could either allow your tenants to stop paying rent temporarily, and allow them to eat the crops grown on other parts of your land, or you could force them to pay rent even if they would starve as a result. You chose this latter course, which resulted in so much starvation, disease, and death.

— You forced the Irish tenant farmers to live on the worst parts of your land with the rockiest soil, where only potatoes could be grown. Including their families, this totaled six million Irish out of a country of eight million. You planted three quarters of the land—the best land—with wheat, oats, and barley, where you also grazed cattle and sheep. But did you let the Irish share in any of this? No. Even during the worst of the famine, you continued to export all this food from Ireland to England. The oat crop alone would have been enough to feed all six million Irish who lived on tenant farms.

— Even as people starved, you had perfectly good land that went unplanted. You didn't want to plant any more crops for fear that this might bring down the prices for your other crops. People starved, and you worried about profits.

— To make matters worse, during the height of the

famine, Irish tenant farmers couldn't pay their rents. So you had them evicted from their homes, and had their homes destroyed. You decided that it would be more profitable if the land were used for cattle and sheep, rather than to allow the Irish to live there and grow food. Keep in mind that these tenant farmers and their families had lived on that land for generations.

— You made sure that you were off in London or Paris so you didn't have to personally witness any of the suffering in Ireland.

— It was a kind of genocide you committed against the Irish. When the potato famine hit you didn't try to help, instead you saw it as an opportunity to make even more money from the land. You compared the removal of Irish in Ireland to the whites' removal of Indians in America. As the Irish died or left the country, your newspaper, the *London Times*, wrote, "Soon a Celt [an Irishman] will be as rare on the banks of the Liffey as a red man on the banks of the Manhattan [Hudson]." To you, this was good news.

## Possible Defense:

- The government is responsible for social welfare, not landlords. You're just a businessman.
- You didn't mean to hurt anyone, but you had to make a living. And in a capitalist system, products (food included) are sold to the highest bidder.
- Nothing you did was illegal; you broke no laws.
- In fact, the Anglican Church (God's representative on earth) never said that what you did was wrong or immoral.
- Perhaps it was all for the best. Many Irish got to go to America.

# Irish Tenant Farmers

**INDICTMENT: YOU ARE CHARGED with the murder of more than a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.**

— It's true that the British landlords, backed up by the British government, turned the potato blight into a famine that killed more than a million Irish. However, what did you do to stop the crimes committed by the British? By not organizing massive resistance to the British, you are also to blame. And you knew that the solution was simple. There was a saying in Ireland at the time: "Sure, this land is full of barley, wheat and oats. The English have only to distribute it." What a foolish hope. You had to *take* it from them. You must have known that they wouldn't just give it to you. The most that the Irish did in the way of "redistributing the wealth" was to steal a few sheep.

— There were six million Irish who the English forced to subsist on potatoes—three quarters of the entire country of Ireland. Why did you put up with it? You allowed the English landlords to export incredible amounts of food while the poor Irish starved. Not only was there barley and oats, there were also plenty of cattle, sheep, and pigs that were sent from Ireland to England everyday.

— It's true that the Irish helped one another by sharing generously. If they hadn't, surely even more people would have died in the potato famine. But the sharing was not enough to make a big difference. You had to do something more, but you didn't.

— Some poor Irish who had lost their land even allowed themselves to be hired as housewreckers, who would destroy homes after tenant farmers were evicted by British landlords. Poor Irish were pitted against other poor Irish for the crumbs provided by the British.

— And in the end, what did you do? You ran away to the United States. In 1847 alone, about a quarter of a million Irish left the island to travel to the United States for a better life. Although we can sympathize, this did nothing to end the injustice in Ireland.

## Possible Defense:

- Everyone—landlords, British government, Anglican Church—exploited you. It wasn't the other way around. And it was the system of colonial capitalism that gave all these people the power to exploit you in the first place.
- You were weakened by disease and poverty. How could you be expected to fight back? Sick Irish peasants were no match for the British army.
- You are the victim, not the murderer. Get real. It's absurd to blame you for your own deaths.

# Anglican Church

**INDICTMENT: YOU ARE CHARGED with the murder of more than a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.**

— In some ways it could be said that the Anglican Church is the most to blame for the starvation of the Irish. Supposedly, you are God’s representative on earth. The Bible says to love your brother as yourself. Yet how did you respond in those two fateful years, 1846 and 1847? You knew that the English landlords forced the Irish to live on the worst land—land that was good only for growing potatoes. The landlords used the best Irish land to get rich, by growing barley and oats, by raising pigs, and by grazing cattle and sheep. Did the landlords keep any of this food in Ireland, even when people began to starve? No. They exported it to England. The government enforced the will of the landlords with military might. And how did the Anglican Church respond? Did you protest? Did you tell the landlords that they were too greedy, that they were not doing their Christian duty? No. You did nothing.

— And to make matters worse, you demanded that the Irish continue to tithe 10 percent of all their crops to the church—a church that the Irish didn’t even belong to, because the vast majority of them were Catholic. This was outrageous. How could you possibly justify these actions? It was the Irish who paid the salaries of your ministers, even though the ministers served the wealthy Protestant minority. The tithe of the Irish was worth about one hundred and twenty five million dollars in today’s money.

— Worse than this, you gave the landlords a way to feel

OK, even good, about what was happening: God must be punishing the Irish, you told them. One landlord’s daughter remembers her mother telling her that, “It was the hand of Providence destroyed the potato crop, for all the other crops prospered, and the very weeds in the stricken fields grew strong and green.” Providence? God’s will? It was the Anglican Church that taught the British landlords this nonsense. You preached that the potato famine was God’s punishment. You taught the English that the Irish were “savages,” misled by their priests. As one French traveler in Ireland commented, all the Protestants “speak of the Catholics with extraordinary hatred and scorn.” Thanks to you.

— When typhoid fever began striking the poor Irish, but rarely the wealthy landlords, many British Anglicans used this as proof that God was punishing the Catholics. The church did nothing to protest against this ridiculous notion.

— The Anglican Church was more than just a spectator to these events. By the early 1830s, the Church owned five million acres of Irish land.

## Possible Defense:

- If the Irish Catholics had converted to the correct religion, and not have been so stubborn, perhaps you would have been able to help them more.
- You broke no laws.
- It would have been wrong to help people who could not help themselves.
- God works in mysterious ways. The potato blight was created by God, not by man.

# British Government

**INDICTMENT: YOU ARE CHARGED with the murder of more than a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.**

— In the first winter of the famine, while 400,000 Irish starved to death, English landlords continued to export food from Ireland to England. The British government could have outlawed the export of food while people starved. However, the government allowed the landlords to export 17 million pounds sterling worth of grain, cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry—food that could have fed 12 million people, twice the number of Irish tenant farmers dependent on potatoes.

— Unbelievably, the British government would not allow charity shipments of food from other countries to be sent directly to Ireland, unless it was on English ships. Otherwise they first had to be sent to England, to be re-shipped on English ships. You made sure that England profited from Irish suffering.

— One law that you enforced said that only the landlord and his guests could shoot game or could fish on the landlord's estate—land where the Irish had lived for generations. So as the landlord and his buddies went on hunting expeditions for sport, starving Irish peasants could only watch.

— One British policy said that the starving Irish might be put to work on public works (welfare) projects, so long as it was not work to grow more food. There was land that was not even planted with crops. However, you worried that if this land was planted with food crops, it would lower the prices that the landlords would receive for their crops. Wouldn't want to hurt the English land-

lords, now would we? Irish were only granted “welfare” work if they first sold any land they owned that was more than one-quarter acre. And who bought this land? That's right: wealthy English landlords. The Irish had a saying: “Beware of the horns of a bull, of the heels of a horse, of the smile of an Englishman.”

— During the worst of the famine, Irish tenant farmers were unable to pay their rents to the landlords. So the landlords began evicting them. Not only did the British parliament pass no laws forbidding these cruel evictions, the British government provided constabulary (police) to make sure that no one would stop the landlords from exercising their property rights. How could you allow—and even promote—such cruelty? On one estate, in Templemore, tenants complained to the government bailiff that they had only a few black potatoes, and that they needed more time to pay the English landlord his rent. Your bailiff replied, “What the devil do we care about you or your black potatoes? It is not us that made them black. You will get two days to pay the rent, and if you don't, you know the consequence.”

## Possible Defense:

- You are responsible for the welfare of the entire British empire, not just one part of it. You did what was best for Britain. In the long run, it's best for everyone.
- The landlords owned the land. They were allowed by law to do whatever they wanted to do with it. They could have fed peasants if they'd chosen to. You didn't stop any charity.
- In the capitalist system, food goes to those who have money to pay for it. That's just how things work. No money, no eat.
- There were simply too many Irish. It may sound cold, but perhaps this was for the best.
- Everything you did was legal.

# “Political Economy”

## The System of Colonial Capitalism

**INDICTMENT: YOU ARE CHARGED with the murder of more than a million Irish peasants who died in the famine years of 1846 and 1847. These were needless deaths. Even without the potato, there was more than enough food produced in Ireland during those years to feed everyone in the country, and still have plenty left over. The action—or lack of action—taken by your group led to untold misery. You are to blame.**

— There really are no evil people here. Sure, people did evil things, but it was the capitalist market that was mostly to blame. Yes, the British landlords exported lots and lots of food while the Irish starved. But why? Because they were devils? No. They did it because that’s what people do in a capitalist economy: They sell their produce where they can get the best price. Hardly anyone in Ireland had any money. So the landlords sent their barley, oats, cattle, sheep, and pigs to England. Not bad people, a bad system: you, capitalism.

— Blame individuals for the famine, blame the British government, the landlords—but when you come right down to it, the real culprit is capitalism and the whole system of British colonialism. If Britain mistreated only Ireland, then perhaps it could be said that particular groups were to blame. But the British destroyed lives wherever they went: India, Kenya, South Africa, Barbados, Jamaica, and so many more. Ireland was but one of many colonies harmed by the system of colonial capitalism. The logic of the system said that the colonies would benefit when the whole empire benefited. So the duty of every colony was to benefit the empire. Therefore, even as the Irish starved, the logic of colonial capitalism—what the English called “political economy”—said that food must be exported from Ireland to feed people in England. Supposedly this way the whole empire would benefit. What stupidity. It was this system that allowed human beings to stand back and do nothing—or even

make matters worse—as more than a million Irish starved to death. This was just the operation of the “political economy.”

— In a capitalist economy, goods go to those who can afford them. If Irish had had the money, the food crops would have stayed in Ireland and have been purchased by the Irish. But because the money was in England, that’s where the food went. It wasn’t a conspiracy, it was just the normal working of the capitalist system. Yes, there were people who made bad decisions, but the real culprit is colonial capitalism.

— To summarize: no particular individual or group of individuals is responsible for the mass starvation in Ireland. It was the system. The system that said: profits before people, England before the colonies.

### Possible Defense:

- Systems are not real. People are real. If people do bad things, blame them—blame the landlords, the government or the Church. Saying, “It’s the system,” is a cop-out.
- Focus on the good that capitalism does: It gets a large amount of goods produced and distributed efficiently.
- Just like in any natural or social system, sometimes the weak don’t survive. It happens, and ironically, short-term pain can make the system stronger and produce long-term gain.
- Call it the system, but people will sell their produce only to the people who have the money to buy it. It’s unrealistic to think that a system could work differently. Poor and starving people don’t have the resources to compete in the marketplace. What’s the alternative?