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Introduction

No two famines are the same, yet, superficially at least, most have a lot in common. The usual symptoms might include high food prices beyond the reach of the poor; increases in evictions, and in crime and antisocial behavior; vagrancy and migration in search of employment and charity; rising unemployment; hunger-induced reductions in the birth and marriage rates; protests and resistance that give way to apathy and hopelessness as the crisis worsens; early philanthropic efforts that, in the more protracted crises, give way to donor fatigue; fear of, and lack of compassion towards, the victims; and, above all, increases in mortality from disease and starvation. There has probably never been a famine where a more caring ruling elite could not have saved more lives. But there are differences too. The context may be economic backwardness and crop failure, but the shortages of food or purchasing power that can lead to famine need not require a big harvest shortfall: war (Sancerre in central France in 1572–73, Leningrad in 1941–44, the western Netherlands in 1944–45) or human agency (the Soviet Union in 1931–33, North Korea in the mid-1990s) may be enough. Moreover, some famines last only a few months (Somalia in 2011–12, the Dutch *Hongerwinter* of 1944–45), while others straddle several years (Ireland in the late 1840s, China in 1959–61).

All famines bring out the best and the worst in people, and generate attitudes and actions that are difficult to pass judgment on. As the Russian literary scholar Dmitri Likhachov, who survived the blockade-famine of Leningrad during World War II, put it so eloquently: “In the time of famine people revealed themselves, stripped themselves, freed themselves of all trumpery. Some turned out to be marvelous, incomparable heroes, others—scoundrels, villains, murderers, cannibals. . . . The heavens were unfurled and in them God

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was seen.”¹ Another Leningrad survivor confided in her diary that only those who had not experienced hunger were capable of heroism and self-sacrifice. Hunger had “degraded and crushed” her and her husband. They had been both the victims and perpetrators of food theft.² Famines always create their own versions of what Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi³ called “grey zones,” where the survivors are more likely to be the stronger and the savvier, the less scrupulous, and the more ruthless and vicious. In Xiakou in China’s Sichuan province during the Great Leap Forward Famine of 1959–61, to survive one had to be “tricky” and willing to steal. Those who died were of the wrong class background, or else “those without guts, and the stupid.”⁴ But the grey zone was an area where, as Levi insisted, “one must beware of the error that consists in judging distant epochs and places with the yardstick that prevails in the here and now.”⁵

In societies the world over, famines have laid bare the dark, ordinarily hidden side of human nature. In a Ukrainian village in 1933, children trying to survive on “cookies” made of frozen potatoes and on wild birds and their eggs dismissed their incapacitated and dying father’s pleas for food: “Go and find potatoes for yourself.” That evening the poor man was “already in the cemetery.”⁶ In Mirganj in the Indian state of Bihar in 1897 a group of starving children followed a compassionate American visitor around their orphanage, “and when we came to a stand they would collect about us, staring at us with dull looks . . . and putting their claw-like little hands on our boots.” It made the visitor shudder, but not the native overseers, who had been depriving these children of their food.⁷ In Mainpuri, Uttar Pradesh, during another Indian famine in 1837, when parents were selling their daughters for a few rupees, the local police merely cautioned them against certain women “of ill fame” who would sell the chil-

¹ Likhachov, as cited in Reid 2011: 194.

² Kochina 1990: 84.

³ Levi 1988. Thanks to Breandán Mac Suibhne for this reference.

⁴ Flower and Leonard 2006.

⁵ Levi 1988: 165.

⁶ Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, vol. 36, Case 333/(NY)1582 (interviewer J.F., type A4), p. 25 (<http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/5608007?n=25&imagesize=1200&jp2Res=.25&printThumbnails=no>).

⁷ Cited in Merewether 1985: 174–75.

dren on as prostitutes.⁸ The chaotic scene at a soup kitchen in County Donegal during the Great Irish Famine was recalled in folklore a century later:

It was in the second year of the famine that a soup cauldron arrived in this place. Bones were boiled in it to make the broth. Two local women looked after the big pot and distributed the soup. It is said that they gave the first and thinnest part of the gruel to the people, while they kept the thicker part at the bottom of the pot for themselves.

That soup pot saw many rough days. The people were so famished that their compassion and consideration had left them. Healthy men used their strength to muscle past women, children, and the weak. They trampled on top of one another, everybody trying to get close to the soup pot.

One day a poor man, a stranger, approached the pot. When he reached the front he stood aside from those next to him for a while; the pushing and shoving was so violent that a woman fainted. Room was made for two men to carry her away from the pot, and they threw her on the ground, leaving her for dead. When they returned they found the poor man next to the pot where the woman was. One of the men caught him by the back of the neck and flung him back on the stony ground. “It wouldn’t take much,” he said to the poor man, “for me to dump you in the cauldron. And you daring to come here to drink some of our broth when it is so scarce and not enough for our own needs.” The poor man got up and left without saying anything. A man named Eoghan Thuathail was standing next to the pot and what had happened to the stranger upset him. He called him back and gave him half of his own broth.⁹

The folk memory of famine recalls many such incidents, in Ireland, in China, in Greece, in Malawi, and elsewhere.¹⁰

Gloomy predictions from demographers and scientists about the imminent threats of overpopulation and famine were commonplace in the 1960s and 1970s. The alarm bells go back further; in 1948 William Vogt and Fairfield Osborn had led the way with *Road to Survival*

⁸ Sharma 2001: 115.

⁹ Póirtéir 1996: 69 (my translation); Mac Suibhne 2013; Ó Gráda 1994.

¹⁰ Zhou 2013; Hionidou 2011; Ó Ciosáin 2004; Vaughan 2007.

and *Our Plundered Planet*, and a decade later French demographer Alfred Sauvy had sounded another warning in his *De Malthus à Mao-Tsé-Toung*.¹¹ Paul Ehrlich's best-selling *Population Bomb* (1968), which was inspired by that earlier literature, began with the statement that "the battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now." Drought-induced famine in the Sahel—that vast semi-arid area south of the Sahara, stretching from Somalia to Sudan—in the early 1970s, followed by more severe famines in Ethiopia in 1973–74 and 1983–85, in Bangladesh in 1974, in western Sudan in 1985, and in Somalia in 1992 may have seemed to confirm these predictions. Today, however, earthquakes and tsunamis are more likely to make the front pages than famines. And while the famines of the last decade or two share many of the characteristics mentioned above with earlier famines, they do pale in terms of severity or intensity.

The territory of the famine historian cuts across those of demographers and economists, historians and political scientists, literary critics, anthropologists, and folklorists.¹² This volume accordingly addresses the topic from a variety of disciplinary, chronological, and geographical perspectives. All essays except the first, which sets out to highlight the repulsiveness of famines, build on some elementary economic concepts.¹³ They cover case studies ranging from *ancien régime* France to India during World War II and from Ireland in the 1840s to Somalia in the 2010s, but their main focus is on some of the twentieth century's most notorious famines. Learning from those famines and placing them in broader historical context guides our assessment, in the concluding essay, of the prospects for a future free of famine.

The horrors of famine include child abandonment, voluntary enslavement, increasing resort to prostitution, and the rupture of communal and neighborly loyalties. But perhaps the greatest horror of

¹¹ "World Famine by 1980 Scientist Warns," *Irish Times*, 2 September 1964; Mathieu Gilbert, "Le Monde échappera-t-il à la famine?" *Le Monde*, 11 November 1958; Sauvy 1958. Compare Lam 2011.

¹² Compare Ravallion 1997; Dyson and Ó Gráda 2002; Póirtéir 1995, 1996; Mac Suibhne 2013; Lynch 1992: 67 (on interdisciplinarity in historical demography).

¹³ Only in Essay 3 does the economics become a bit more complex.

all is being the victim (or even worse, perpetrator) of cannibalism. Essay 1, “Eating People Is Wrong,” is about this disturbing feature of famine. Homophagy is so universally frowned on that in the past reports of it during famines have often been dismissed as a dramatic motif or trope not intended to be taken literally. But cannibalistic acts have been highlighted—and some perpetrators and victims identified—in several recent accounts of the Chinese Great Leap Forward Famine. Both Frank Dikötter’s *Mao’s Famine* (2010) and Zhou Xun’s *The Great Famine in China, 1958–1962: A Documentary History* (2012) devote chapters to the topic, and they do not spare the reader the gory details. The rhetorical impact is powerful.

Famine cannibalism has a long history, however, and instances linked to earlier famines in China, and in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, the early 1930s, and the early and mid-1940s were based on more than hearsay. Less convincing, perhaps, were rumors in May 1946 that in the famished suburbs of Budapest “children had been killed and sold for meat,” or the claim in June 1979 by one of Vietnam’s boat people that “those on his boat were reduced to cannibalism,” or recurrent reports in the 1990s and 2000s of famine-induced cannibalism in North Korea.¹⁴ On the other hand, in September 1969 the only remaining Western correspondent in war-torn Biafra was anxious to deny any return to cannibalism there, although it had been “once widespread.”¹⁵ Such reports highlight the difficulties of separating fact from fiction and the silences and taboos surrounding famine cannibalism. The first essay nevertheless makes the case for cannibalism as one of the horrors, if not one of the defining characteristics, of severe famine, and suggests that the lack of evidence for it during recent food crises may merely indicate that they were “minor” by historical standards. The essay devotes special attention to the case of Ireland and, in particular, to claims of cannibalism during the famine of the 1840s.

¹⁴ “Cannibalism Rumour Sweeps Budapest,” *Irish Times*, 13 May 1946; “Refugee Crisis a Global Concern,” *Irish Times*, 20 June 1979 (referring to Vietnam); Mark Nicol, “Famine-struck North Koreans ‘Eating Children.’” *The Telegraph*, 8 June 2003. Further details are provided in Essays 1 and 5.

¹⁵ “Biafran Morale Is Slumping After Two Years of War and Starvation,” *Irish Times*, 16 September 1969.

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Essay 2, “‘Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency,’” revisits the Great Bengal Famine of 1943–44. That famine, which caused the deaths of over two million people, achieved paradigmatic status in the wake of Amartya Sen’s classic *Poverty and Famines* (1981). The timing and context of this horrendous crisis—on the eve of Indian independence and after several decades when India was free of famine—had already guaranteed it a prominent place in post-colonial historiography. My essay, based in large part on contemporary press and archival sources, reassesses the role of politics, market failure, and food supply in India’s last major famine. It also offers a fresh perspective on the political economy of public action in a context dominated by wartime priorities, colonial rule, and communal tensions.

Essay 3, “Markets and Famines,” focuses on an issue that also resonated in Bengal, the role of food markets during famines. In the wake of a minor famine in the west of Ireland in 1822, novelist Maria Edgeworth consulted her friend, the famous economist David Ricardo, on the merits of the potato as the staple of the Irish poor. At that time about one-third of Ireland’s population relied almost exclusively on a food from which there was no trading down, because the potato was “*an bia ba shaoire ag síol Éabha* [the cheapest food available to man].”¹⁶ Ricardo in reply insisted that much depended on whether the crop was storable from one year to the next—as Edgeworth (incorrectly) claimed it was—and on the presence of merchants who would store the potatoes. The skeptical economist (who represented the Irish borough of Portarlington in Parliament at the time) required “some proof that there were among you some of those patient, plodding, calculating merchants who would be contented to enter into a speculation on a prospect of its success in four, five, or ten years.”¹⁷ For Ricardo such merchants mitigated the risk of famine.

But in *The Black Prophet*, which appeared in 1847, at the height of the Great Irish Famine, Irish novelist William Carleton wrote of “a

¹⁶ Austin Bourke 1993: 52–73; Ó Gráda and Ó Muirthe 2010: 56.

¹⁷ Ricardo to Edgeworth, 13 December 1822 (in Ricardo 1951: letter 511).

class of hardened wretches, who look forward to a period of dearth as to one of great gain and advantage, and who contrive . . . to make . . . sickness, famine, and general desolation . . . sources of successful extortion and rapacity, and consequently of gain to themselves.”¹⁸ Throughout history those threatened by famine—and sympathizers such as Carleton—singled out for opprobrium traders who “gambled on hunger.” The hungry, convinced that they were victims of an artificial scarcity, demanded a “moral economy” that delivered food to all at a fair price. Supporters of unfettered markets argued, on the contrary, that traders should not be impeded, and that their actions minimized the damage caused by famines.

The same contrasting views on the role of food markets in alleviating or exacerbating food shortages crop up repeatedly in discussions of famine. They have a huge resonance for Bengal in 1943–44. After a review of the economic-historical debate on markets and famines, which goes back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Essay 3 turns first to a series of historical case studies: famines in nineteenth-century India, in *ancien régime* France, in Ireland in the late 1840s, and in Finland in the 1860s. Its strategy is to compare spatial and intertemporal arbitrage in crisis and non-crisis situations. It also assesses evidence on how markets functioned during some recent famines and near-famines. It ends up arguing that while, by and large, market forces may have done little to mitigate famine mortality, they usually did not exacerbate it either.

The Chinese Great Leap Famine of 1959–61 was undoubtedly the greatest modern famine ever in terms of lives lost. It is still among the most controversial, not least in China, where some neo-Maoists are now denying even the lower-bound estimates of excess mortality proposed by demographers.¹⁹ Is it enough to declare the famine “Mao’s Famine” (as, say, Frank Dikötter or Jasper Becker would); or should it be considered instead as an ill-conceived and reckless at-

¹⁸ Carleton 1979: 48.

¹⁹ Chris Buckley, “Milder Accounts of Hardships under Mao Arise As His Birthday Nears,” *New York Times*, 16 October 2013; “New (Approved) Assessments: the Great Famine,” *The Economist* 9 September 2013 (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2013/09/new-approved-assessments>).

tempt at making a desperately backward economy catch up (as, say, Felix Wemheuer or Stephen Wheatcroft would argue)? What role did economic conditions before the Great Leap Forward play? Is there any resolution to the controversy about excess mortality? Long “hidden,” the famine has recently been the subject of several high-profile books aimed at a broad market, including Dikötter’s *Mao’s Famine* (2010), Yang Jisheng’s *Tombstone* (2012), Zhou Xun’s *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine* (2013), and Felix Wemheuer’s *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (2014).²⁰ Essay 4, “Great Leap into Great Famine,” addresses this largely man-made catastrophe as described in these works in broader historiographical perspective. Such a perspective would include—of course—comparing China in the 1950s with the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s; but it would also include looking back to the 1920s, when Walter Mallory, secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission, dubbed China “the land of famine,” and to the 1930s, when English economic historian R. H. Tawney likened the position of the rural population in parts of China to “that of a man standing up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him,” and focusing more on the huge regional inequalities in famine mortality.²¹

By historical standards, what have passed for famines in the new millennium (so far) have been “small.” They have killed very few—with the exception of Somalia in 2011–12, a very special case—and have not lasted long. Nowadays the closest countries outside parts of sub-Saharan Africa come to famine is what the Food and Agricultural Organization dubs “severe localized food insecurity,” and that hardly ever culminates in famine. Insofar as recent history is any guide, it indicates that famines in peacetime are no longer the looming threat they have been throughout history. “In peacetime” is the crucial qualifier. The globalization of disaster relief and increasing global food output are responsible for this. Is it time, then, to turn those apocalyptic forecasts of the 1960s and 1970s on their head?

²⁰ See also Zhou 2012; Manning and Wemheuer 2011; Wemheuer 2011; Garnaut 2013a, 2014b.

²¹ Mallory 1926; Tawney 1966: 77.

At the same time, malnutrition remains a more intractable and pressing problem: while the proportion of the world's poor that is malnourished continues to decline, the food situation facing a billion or so people condemns them to ill health and premature death. These contrasting signals are not lost on international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), since they have important implications for the nature of relief work and the future of humanitarian aid. Essay 5, "Famine Is Not the Problem—For Now," explores how recent famine history intersects with the role of NGOs and global malnutrition. It also assesses the challenge posed by the prospect of global warming.

An earlier version of "Eating People Is Wrong" was presented at the annual meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies (New Orleans, March 2012). "Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency" began as a paper presented to a workshop on twentieth-century famines in Melbourne University in June 2010, and "Famine Is Not the Problem" grew out of an invited lecture to the 82nd Anglo-American Conference of Historians (Institute of Historical Research, London, July 2013). Essays 3 and 4 build on and considerably extend material previously published in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and *Population and Development Review*, respectively.²²

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²² Ó Gráda 2005, 2011, 2013a.

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