

## **When Famine Disappeared Off the Face of the Earth**

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**In this historical study, Cormac Ó Gráda explains why famine is disappearing from human history. Food is now abundantly produced, consumed and distributed on a global scale and he claims that only unaccountable governments can use it as a political weapon and create famine. However, the problem of sustainable production of food remains to be solved.**

Reviewed: Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2009, 344 pp. \$19.95

It is hard to remember what used to be taken for common sense after it has changed. It used to be taken as common sense, for example, that famine was God's punishment for the wicked, or nature's revenge on the promiscuously reproductive. It also used to be common sense that famine was a permanent condition of human history. We have more or less forgotten the first two tenets. With Cormac Ó Gráda's effortlessly readable new book, the third may have to go as well. Global food abundance, better transportation and communication, and the extensive coordinated efforts of governments and NGOs have more or less brought the history of famine to an end. This is the new endpoint to the history of famine that Ó Gráda wants to tell.

### **An optimistic take on the history of famine**

Ó Gráda situates his study within a masterful overview of the issues and debates that have swirled around the subject since Thomas Malthus published his famous *Essay on the*

*Principle of Population* in 1798, in which he theorized famine as the outcome of population growth outstripping food supply. This “positive check,” he believed, came into play whenever the usual negative checks, such as abstinence, failed to lower the birth rate — and which the lowest classes, inured to immorality, were least likely to respect, thereby threatening welfare of all. Malthus’ pessimism about the capacity of people to produce food at the same rate at which they reproduced themselves has been a tenacious and popular attitude for the past two centuries. Perhaps millennia of anxiety about harvest failure have hard-wired us to fear that, at some point, the food will run out. It is a habit of mind that has been hard to shake, especially for those of us who have lived through the largest absolute increase in world population in human history, and have been recurrently reminded that, amidst our abundance, there are places where people lack food.

Ó Gráda would like us to step back from this pessimism, given that we have also lived through the largest absolute increase in food production in world history. He has good evidence to suggest that the situation is not as dire as we think it is, and indeed that it has not been as dire in the past either. Looking back over the history of famine, he doubts that starvation has been the constant and powerful material factor in human history we take it to be. He argues that the demographic impact of famine is always short-lived. Though many die during a famine, many survive and will reproduce quickly to make up for the deficit. This compensation is cold comfort for those who lose their family members, and Ó Gráda, whose earlier research is on the Irish potato famine, does not retreat so far into social science as to neglect the individual tragedies of famine. He is aware of the powerful hold that the prospect of famine has had over human subjectivity. But he does want us to look at the larger picture and then ask ourselves whether our in-born pessimism is justified. Despite a deep-seated belief that famine has been a regularly recurring experience through human history, it has been neither as frequent, nor as widespread, nor as destructive, as has been assumed. A sense of the fragility of human survival in the face of hunger lingers, yet we are now a long way from the gloomy experiences of the eighteenth century that led Malthus to propose his unhappy correlation between population growth and food supply.

**The state’s responsibility for producing famines**

Ó Gráda writes thirty years after Amartya Sen's study of the great Bengal famine of 1943, *Poverty and Famines*<sup>1</sup>. This was the most influential intervention in thinking about famine since Malthus, and its influence can still be felt in Ó Gráda's book. Sen's signal contribution against common sense was to argue that famine is not an instance of there being no food. It is an instance of there being a difference between who is entitled to food and who is not. His entitlement theory of famine gained much attention and refocused the issues that famine was thought to entail. In seeking to establish a new common sense on the subject of famine, Ó Gráda does not so much go beyond Sen as shift the emphasis that Sen placed on the functioning of markets. It helps to recall that Sen developed his concept of entitlement in the 1970s, a period when proponents of the neo-liberal order were just gaining ascendancy and fiercely advocating the notion that markets correct all flaws in the economy and, if left to operate freely, all shortcomings of government as well. By reconstructing the false reporting on grain production that led to the Bengal famine, Sen was able to make the point that commodity markets, even when they function as they are supposed to, cannot be expected to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Markets favour class interests when these offer a better pay-out.

This is a point that Ó Gráda accepts, and indeed illustrates many times when he attests that the poor during a famine have a far greater likelihood of starving to death than the rich. Where Ó Gráda seeks to shift emphasis is in seeing the state, and in particular the war-making proclivities of the state, as the culprit in the story. The Bengal famine happened because Great Britain was at war, and chose to put war needs ahead of any other claims. On the basis of confidential government correspondence that was not available to Sen at the time he wrote his study, Ó Gráda reveals that imperial authorities were fully aware of a growing crisis in the Bengal food supply. The evidence Sen cites to argue that food was being withheld — that the problem was not shortage but distribution — were the reports that Leopold Avery, the secretary of state for India, made to London that there was “no overall shortage of foodgrains” and that the difficulty was “maldistribution.” Avery was simply not telling the truth, and he later changed his statements to London, but he did so too late to convince the imperial centre that the grain which

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983.

it wanted shipped to meet war needs elsewhere should be left in Bengal. Markets can exacerbate food crises, but they tend to do so under conditions that are essentially politically constructed.

Over the half-century since the Bengal famine, the political conditions enabling food supply have improved to an extent that permits us to think that famine is disappearing from human history. Ó Gráda's evidence for this view improves as he moves closer to the present, such as the 2005 famine in Niger, when a swift international response headed off disaster. Some of the credit for the growing obsolescence of famine must go to the network of public and private agencies that are able to relieve massive suffering on short notice, but as Ó Gráda sensibly observes, much of it belongs simply to the modern transformation we know as "the demographic transition," the shift to later marriage and smaller families that accompanies urbanization. Niger is one of the few places where this has not yet happened. In a structural sense, this is why drought and locusts pitched the country toward famine. If a Malthusian view can still find a niche to nurture its pessimism, it is here. But it is also why the population of Niger has been able to recover so quickly.

With the possible exception of Niger, what distinguishes our world from Malthus' is not just that food is abundant, but that it is produced, consumed, and distributed now on a global scale. Food is not only abundant but can be moved to wherever it is needed, so long as governments are willing. This is why the growth of a global society that is able to insist that governments be accountable is just as important for Ó Gráda as the technical capacity to deliver food to stricken areas. North Korea is evidence that famine only occurs in the contemporary world where such accountability is absent.

If we go deeper back in history, though, dearth on a scale beyond what even a well-administered government – such as imperial China, for example, with its sophisticated system of state granaries and market incentives – was able to relieve may have had more powerful effects than Ó Gráda's analysis leads us to recognize. The food abundance we now enjoy buffers us from memories of this experience. Not only have famines virtually disappeared from our experience, even malnutrition continues to decline worldwide. It is therefore not unreasonable to

think that the history of famine is over – so long, Ó Gráda reminds us, as governments do not use food as a political weapon or deprive people of food by waging war.

### **The new threat of unsustainable industrial agriculture**

If there is any reason to step back from the seduction of plenty, it is the foundation on which that plenty rests. It used to be that the soil, water, and temperature conditions needed to grow food could be adjusted using modest technologies that relied on renewable energy in order to improve food outputs. This has changed. Today the inputs of non-renewable energy for food production are massive and growing. With the industrialization of food production has grown the accumulation of noxious chemicals in our food, with potentially toxic effects. Rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels, soil depletion, and climate change further undermine the delicate balance that farmers in the last century have struggled to achieve between inputs and outputs. The alarm has been sounded, and organic farming has emerged in many parts of the world to experiment with new modes of food production in order to address the potential unsustainability of industrial agriculture. Economists argue that organic farming cannot feed the world. If we have to move in the direction of organic farming to achieve a more sustainable relationship with our environment and they are right, we may not be as comfortably settled in our transition to a post-agrarian world as we would like to think. Despite Ó Gráda's wise counsel, it is not easy to break free of Malthus' pessimism.

It would be convenient to dismiss the concern over sustainable agriculture as the natural tendency of humans to worry about threats that do not yet exist. Yet this may just prove to be one threat worth worrying about. If that is the case, something will have to be done in the not too distant future if we are all to continue eating adequately and well. Otherwise, we might just find ourselves slipping unawares into the next phase of famine's history.

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