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From famine to food crisis: what history can teach us about local and global subsistence crises

Eric Vanhaute

The number of famine prone regions in the world has been shrinking for centuries. It is currently mainly limited to sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the impact of endemic hunger has not declined and the early twenty-first century seems to be faced with a new threat: global subsistence crises. In this essay I question the concepts of famine and food crisis from different analytical angles: historical and contemporary famine research, food regime theory, and peasant studies. I will argue that only a more integrated historical framework of analysis can surpass dualistic interpretations grounded in Eurocentric modernization paradigms. This article successively debates historical and contemporary famine research, the contemporary food regime and the new global food crisis, the lessons from Europe's 'grand escape' from hunger, and the peasantry and 'depeasantization' as central analytical concepts. Dualistic histories of food and famine have been dominating developmentalist stories for too long. This essay shows how a blending of historical and contemporary famine research, food regime theory and new peasant studies can foster a more integrated perspective.

Keywords: famines; global food crisis; peasantries

Famines are not what they used to be. By historical standards, the hunger crises of the past decades have been 'small' crises. Crop failures remain a threat, but a combination of public action and food aid tends to mitigate mortality. Although non-crisis death rates in hunger stricken regions like sub-Saharan Africa remain high, excess mortality due to famine tends to be low unless linked to war. That is why the ambition of recent famine historiography is not limited to explaining famines of the past; it is also to understand why they are less frequent today (Ó Gráda 2009, 257–82). The fact that contemporary famines are less frequent and less severe than historical famines can be seen as a success story of world historical proportions. However, it is only a partial success story. Famine has not yet been eradicated. Moreover, food security is threatened by new forms of vulnerability, instigated by a new wave of 'globalization' in economics and governance. In the second half of the twentieth century, total agricultural output rose faster (by a factor 2.6) than the world population did (by a factor 2.4). This achievement, in a period of unprecedented population growth, is even more remarkable because the percentage

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of people engaged in agriculture has decreased worldwide from 65 percent in 1950 to 42 percent in 2000 (FAO Statistics). However, even though the average per capita food supply rose by one fifth between 1960 and 2000, the number of undernourished people doubled. This means that the ratio has been stabilizing to around 15 percent of the world population for some decades now.¹ On top of this, rapidly rising prices of agricultural commodities triggered in 2007–2008 the first twenty-first century food crisis, increasing the statistics of undernourishment even further.

The aim of this article is to expand insights from historical famine research to the debates about the contemporary food regime and the recent global food crisis. Famine, hunger and food crises are obviously related societal phenomena, but most of the time they are analyzed and interpreted from different viewpoints or realities. Temporal impacts and spatial scales differ enormously between the ‘event’ of a famine, the ‘process’ of hunger and the ‘structure’ of food insecurity. Yet they can only be understood in relationship to societal organization and, in particular, the position of the majority of food producers: the peasants. My central question is how historical famine and peasant studies can generate new knowledge about contemporary questions of hunger and food (in)security. I will show that the first condition is that this research seriously engages with social theory as developed in new peasant studies and food regime research. The food regime perspective has outlined global changes in agriculture and food chains within the systemic cycles of historical capitalism. However, and although the undermining of local farming, the dispossession of peasantries, and the creation of new forms of local action draw much attention in contemporary food regime literature (McMichael 2009), the agency of agricultural producers is still difficult to frame within this macro-perspective. On the other hand, micro-oriented peasant studies have moved from a classic binary modernization perspective towards an ‘articulated’ analysis of both peasantries and processes of depeasantization/repeasantization as sets of integrated social relationships. New famine studies have the ability to incorporate these different scales of analysis, local/global and event/process/structure. The first global food crisis of the twenty-first century is a powerful incentive to bring this knowledge and these insights together. It teaches us that sustainable food security in a globalizing world cannot be obtained by a further expansion of the global food market. As Harriet Friedmann argued almost two decades ago, the appropriate site for reshaping global food relations in more sustainable ways lies outside the global scale relations of food regimes. It is sited at the local, regional, communal and ecologically-embedded level of food relationships (Friedmann 1993).

I will elaborate my argument in four sections. In the first section, I comment on the notion of ‘famine as a community crisis’ as derived from historical famine research (1). The second section tries to understand the first twenty-first century global food crisis within the framework of contemporary famine literature and the perspective of food regimes (2). Section three looks at the unique European model of

¹Estimates of ‘undernourished population’ from FAO Statistics: 300 to 500 million in the 1960s (10–15 percent of the world population), 535 million in 1972–1974 (14 percent), 580 million in 1979–1981 (13 percent), 840 in 1990 (16 percent), 820 in 2000 (13 percent) and an estimated one billion in 2009 (15 percent). Earlier estimates from David Grigg (1982, 1985, 5–30, with some added figures in the second edition, 1993), and from Lucile F. Newman (1990, 395–6). David Grigg is very critical about the periodic revisions in the FAO definitions of undernourishment and malnourishment, such as the one responsible for the sudden rise of the 1980 numbers from 580 to 900 million.

a parallel process of marginalizing the threat of famine and dismantling peasant societies (3). In the last section, I focus on peasantry and depeasantization as analytical concepts (4). The threat of new, large-scale food crises indicate that the European model of conquering the phantom of famine and hunger through radical depeasantization has become a dead-end road. To understand this impasse we need a more integrated historical framework of analysis, surpassing dualistic interpretations grounded in Eurocentric modernization paradigms. This essay shows how a blending of historical and contemporary famine research, food regime theory and new peasant studies can foster this process.

From famine: old and new famine research

Famine literature often lacks clear definitions of the related concepts famine, hunger, malnutrition and food crisis. Famine is mostly understood as an event, whereas hunger or malnutrition point at structural processes: 'The term famine indeed represents the upper end of the continuum whose average is "hunger"'. Malnutrition might be seen as slow-burning famine' (Ó Gráda 2009, 6). Traditional famines are mostly described as sudden shocks, almost always linked to natural disasters (rain, temperature) or ecological shocks (eruptions, blights, plagues). Common symptoms of famine crises include rising prices, food riots, increased crime against property, significant numbers of actual or imminent deaths from starvation, a rise in temporary migration, and frequently the emergence of famine-induced infectious diseases (Ó Gráda 2009, 6–7). Contemporary famine research has shifted the perception of hunger crises as natural or technical problems related to the disruption of a food system, to famines as a lack of accountability and failed responses by public actors (Devereux 2007a). Famine crises can be perceived as an outcome of the breakdown of a social and economic system as well as a product of this system. That is why, according to authors like Devereux, 'new famines' are almost always political events because they are almost always preventable.

Over the past three decades, these new insights have strongly affected the nature of historical famine research. Subsistence crises, particularly European *Ancien Régime* crises, have been the subject of extensive historical research for a long time. Malthusian and Marxian perspectives dominated earlier writings; they focused on the relationship between famines and demographic crises, and on the impact of subsistence crises on revolutionary political events.² Famines only became visible when they could be 'measured'. That is why in its most basic statistical definition, a famine pointed at a 'severe' shortage of food accompanied by 'significant' increased mortality.³ This approach encouraged former historical famine research to identify and measure crop failures and demographic crises. In the 1970s, following E.P. Thompson's moral economy approach, attention in food crisis research shifted to urban markets and the dialectical relationship between collective and public actions (Tilly 1971, Tilly 1975, Walter and Wrightson 1976). Inspired by a wave of new village studies and *Alltagsgeschichte*, from the 1980s onwards historians and social

²See e.g. Meuvret (1946), Appleby (1980), Rotberg and Rabb (1983), Galloway (1988), Dupâquier (1989), Walter and Schofield (1989). Especially on famine and social and political order: Walter and Wrightson (1976), Labrousse (1943, 1956).

³See e.g. Ó Gráda (2007, 5–6), Devereux (2007a), Howe and Devereux (2004, 355–6), Murton (2000), Cuny and Hill (1999, 1–16), Arnold (1988, 5–28).

scientists tried to study and understand famines as integrated social phenomena, as communal processes, causing ‘the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least-powerful groups in a community, to a point where, as a group, they can no longer maintain a sustainable livelihood’ (Walker 1989, 6). The vulnerability of local societies to economic distress is not seen as solely the function of population numbers, markets and prices. It has to be related to a cluster of at least three critical factors: the impact of the crisis, the social and economic order, and the way people are able to keep control of their own fate, individually, within the household and in the local community. As Walter and Schofield noted in 1989, ‘Famine is a collective problem, starvation an individual fate’ (26).⁴ This ‘collective’ level includes the impact of social differentiation (along the lines of income, gender and age), the strength of local institutions, and the structure of the regional economy.

This broader interpretation was triggered by the publications of the Indian economist Amartya Sen who, in his famous work *Poverty and Famines*, shifted the focus of famine research from the availability to the entitlement of food: ‘Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat’ (Sen 1983, 1, original italics). In his words, to understand famine we need to understand both ownership patterns and exchange entitlements, and the forces that lie behind them. ‘This requires careful consideration of the nature of modes of production and the structure of economic classes as well as their interrelations’ (Sen 1983, 6). Like the paradigm of the moral economy, this approach highlights individual agency, the actions and reactions of men and women regarding a decreased ‘command over food’ (Ravallion 1997, 1206–7). The paradigm of famine research is broadened with a new level of (individual) command over food that is inserted between the former levels of (individual) availability of food and (individual) suffering. This more complex model of interpretation shed new light on the often nonlinear relationships between crop figures, market prices and mortality rates. This was also stressed by Louise Tilly, who was one of the first to take up the entitlement approach in historical research: ‘The analysis of entitlements promises to complete the transformation of thinking about conflicts over food begun by Thompson, Rose, Walter, and Wrightson. . . . Entitlements are the mechanism that link ordinary people’s experience to these large-scale processes’ (Tilly 1983, 151).

The entitlement approach shifted focus from the availability of food (*production based*) to the distribution of food (*market based*). This triggered two new lines of analysis. One favored the individual actor, with the lack of purchasing power and/or property rights as a main cause of vulnerability.⁵ The other looked at the functioning of food (grain) markets. A disturbance of the ‘Smithian’ open and competitive markets is seen as one of the main causes for a decline in food entitlements (Persson 1999). Both arguments fail, as Devereux (2007b, 84) has pointed out, to take into account the ‘importance of institutions in determining entitlements’, including households and village communities (*transfer based*). Internal household power relationships usually remain hidden, as do what he calls ‘fuzzy entitlements’,

⁴See also, ‘The social order mattered: as a critical determinant of demographic change, and as the basis of political as well as economic institutions, it fashioned the conditions of death, no less than those of life’ (Walter and Schofield 1989, 73).

⁵See e.g. the works of de Soto (2000).

entitlements generated from communal property regimes, rights or claims over resources that are held collectively. 'Rights can also be exercised at varying levels, from ownership (the strongest form, including rights of disposal) to access and usufruct rights (the weakest form, where ownership and use are often separated)' (Devereux 2007b, 83).

Within these debates, famines are singled out as 'community crises', moments of tension when scarcity and human suffering are accompanied and aggravated by social breakdowns. 'A syndrome with webs of causation through which communities lose their ability to support marginal members who consequently either migrate in families because lack of access to food, or die of starvation or starvation related disease' (Currey and Hugo 1984, 1). This is why famines are both unique experiences occupying a finite span of historical time and human experience and recurring patterns revealing insight into a society's deeper structures (Murton 2000, 1414). Recent comparative research on the European potato famine of the 1840s showed that:

... the causes and effects of the subsistence crisis of the 1840s cannot be evaluated on a national scale. Regional differences are a key feature. Only in Ireland did the famine grow into a national disaster, and even then its incidence varied considerably by region. In the rest of Europe, the crisis was examined and handled as a regional event. (Vanhaute *et al.* 2007, 34)

Famines are regional crises that can only be understood by the 'local story' (Solar 1997, 123).

The notion of famine as an event (sudden crisis), a process (accelerated destitution) and a structure (the breakdown of societal networks) creates the need for a more integrated famine research project. This project has to combine several research lines. First, it has to measure the direct impact of a food crisis, in traditional terms expressed in measures of food availability decline (crops and livestock production, market provisioning), human suffering (mortality, health and disease), and adapted demographic strategies (marriage, fertility, migration). Secondly, we have to understand the formal and informal coping strategies that deal with acute forms of stress as well as reactions from and possible reorganization of the livelihoods of these families (Howe and Devereux 2004, 356–8). Thirdly, a re-examination of rural subsistence crises must aim at a broader interpretation of the societal context of families, neighborhoods, villages, and public authorities. Last but not least, historical famine research needs to address more contemporary famine theory. Even though historians have learned a lot from contemporary studies, historical famine research that integrates the different fields of analysis mentioned above is still scarce.⁶

To food crisis: contemporary hunger and food regime debates

As stated above, famines have traditionally been described as short-term events, confined to restricted geographical areas and, in most cases, taking the lives of limited numbers of people. These famines have mostly been studied as remnants of a

⁶Interestingly enough, it is more often demographers and economists, geographers, anthropologists and political scientists, rather than historians, who have made the running in the recent discussions of famine and who have advanced many of the most challenging theories' (Arnold 1988, 1).

peasant past or, in the words of Ó Gráda, as hallmarks of economic backwardness (Ó Gráda 2009, 9). Modern famines however are typically regarded as avoidable humanitarian crises, or more bluntly, as crimes against humanity.⁷ That is why contemporary famine research has moved towards a political theory of famine prevention. When looking at the relationship between famine, hunger and poverty, new questions arise; to paraphrase Sen and Drèze (1991, 3–7): Why does India's success story in famine prevention in the second half of the twentieth century seem to have done little help to combat chronic hunger?⁸ The fact that fighting famines did not prevent the spread of endemic hunger remains one of the most puzzling paradoxes of our times. According to Amartya Sen (1990, 376), endemic hunger:

... kills in a more concealed matter ... It all happens rather quietly without any clearly visible deaths from hunger. ... While regular hunger is largely a result of inadequate entitlements on a continuing basis, famines are the result of disastrous declines of entitlements that typically occur rather suddenly.

Over time, the predominant character of hunger seems to have shifted from frequent food shortages to chronic food poverty. This change of scale has placed an unprecedented number of people at peril of hunger at the same time (Newman 1990, 394–401, Dando 1980, 90–1).

The 'invention' of structural hunger has brought an old and a new perspective into the contemporary famine debate. The first one tries to re-edify Malthus by arguing that world population growth will outstrip food supplies. This question has been pending since the middle of the twentieth century, with peaks in 'the doomsday debates' just after the Second World War, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in the early twenty-first century (Grigg 1985, Linner 2003, 199–209). The standard policy answer, endorsed by the expanding agribusiness, has been new 'green revolutions', an increased caloric output per capita.⁹ Nowadays, biotechnological innovations such as genetically modified crops are at the centre of the debate, often with little reference to the broader question of the division of knowledge, assets and wealth.

The second, largely opposite argument points at the oblique relationship within the global food system. By analysing 'Victorian famines' (the three global subsistence crises in the last quarter of the nineteenth century), Mike Davis attached great weight to the increasing development arrears in the periphery of 'a London-centred world economy' (Davis 2001, 6–7). By placing famine in a broader perspective of societal changes and global food security, the very character and perception of the concept changed. From 'an endemic disease in peasant societies' (Arnold 1988, 50), 'incorporated into man's biological regime' (Braudel 2002, 73), and 'the very badge of civilization' (Manning 2004, 69), famine and hunger have shifted to powerful weapons in the ideological debate about the contemporary society. As Vernon demonstrated, Imperial Britain played a formative role in the changing meaning of

⁷The criminalisation of famine proposes political responsibility as the prime and sometimes only cause: Edkins (2007), de Waal (1997, 1–6, 213–21), Plümper and Neumayer (2009).

⁸The persistence of hunger in many countries in the contemporary world is related not merely to a general lack of affluence, but also to substantial – often extreme – inequalities within society' (Sen and Drèze 1991, 8).

⁹In the South the so-called 'Green Revolutions' promoted the extensive industrial farming of a small number of mass crops: wheat, corn, rice, and soy, sometimes called the crops of the poor and the livestock.

hunger. Although it had rid itself of large-scale subsistence crises, hunger remained endemic both within Britain's working classes and throughout its expanding empire (Vernon 2007, 2–3). One of the most compelling paradigms to understanding agrarian change within a macro-historical perspective is the concept of (successive) food regimes (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). By historicizing the global food system, the concept reflects periodic shifts in hegemonic regimes of agricultural production and exchange. According to Philip McMichael (2009, 140), 'food regime analysis brings a structured perspective to the understanding of agriculture and food's role in capital accumulation across time and place'. Neoliberal globalization since the late 1970s created a new neoliberal corporate food regime, 'centred on the political elimination of barriers to capital in social and natural relations' (see McMichael 2009). The deficiencies in this neoliberal food system have energized the food regime perspective for some years now, renewing the search for a more contingent, historically contextual understanding of world agriculture (Campbell and Dixon 2009). Central in the food regime perspective became the questions of social and ecological sustainability and legitimacy (Araghi 2003, Campbell 2009).

The globalization of the problem of hunger is closely related to the emergence of a global food system in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ross 2003, McMichael 2009). A new acceleration occurred after 1950 with the internationalization of inputs to the food system and of food itself, with the rise of agribusiness, and from the 1980s with the seductive call for open markets and agricultural specialization as engines of development (Millman 1990, 307–8). The liberalization of agricultural trade and the massive dumping of food surpluses dramatically increased food dependency in the South. The trade balance shifted from a surplus of one billion dollars in 1979 to a deficit of 11 billion dollars in 2001. Trade deregulation programs and the neglect of local production systems further weakened the position of small peasant producers in the South (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b). Investments in the 'green revolution' provoked severe losses in biodiversity and crop diversity and promoted ecological degradation. The increased concentration of production chains and the growing vulnerability of smallholders, still about 50 percent of the world's population, pushed international organizations to revise their position on the problem of hunger and food security in the 1990s. The *World Bank Report 1995* shifted the focus toward poverty reduction because 'hunger is the most deplorable manifestation of poverty' (Binswanger and Landell-Mills 1995, 1). New growth strategies, new technologies, and new investments in individual capacities were seen as major solutions.

Now that the effective eradication of famine crises seems realistic for the first time in history, the world is confronted in 2006/2008 with what seems to be a new type of global food crisis. Between 1974 and 2005, food prices on world markets fell by three-quarters in real terms. In 2006 and 2007 they jumped by 75 percent. The *Economist Food Price Index* was higher than any time since it was created in 1845 (*The Economist* 2007). In 2007 and 2008, 20 countries faced severe food riots. In October 2008, 33 countries were reported to be in a state of a severe food crisis.¹⁰ This 'food price crisis' revealed the vulnerability of global food chains in the early twenty-first century (Johnston *et al.* 2010). Rising prices were not the result of disturbances in local supply and demand but were triggered by global market

¹⁰*Global Hunger Index. The challenge of hunger 2008*. Available from: <http://www.welthungerhilfe.de/global-hunger-index-2008.html>

fluctuations and price settings. World grain reserves shrank to a long-time low of 50 days. These events did put agriculture back on the international development agenda after being neglected for more than two decades. According to international organizations, the first twenty-first century food crisis was manmade; it was caused by ‘short-run overshooting’ (bad harvests, low food stocks, export bans, speculation) and long-run negative shifts (population growth, demand for animal feed, biofuel policies). This combination was intensified because agriculture was neglected in development theory and policies over the last 25 years (the ‘lost decades’), and due to climate change. Whatever the cause, it became clear that the ‘green revolution’ of the 1970s and 1980s had run out of steam. Technological innovations and production gains had generated high social and ecological costs in addition to considerable production gains. However, the policy reforms promoted in the *World Development Report 2008* are still focused on production and supply. Its central purpose is to develop the ‘capacities’ of small farmers. The peasantries have been rediscovered, albeit in a different form. As (small) market producers they need to be transformed to an engine of growth and development. In order to become players on the world market, these small-scale farmers need to be ‘empowered’, made more competitive by increasing their productivity (‘greening the green revolution’); by facilitating access to markets, credit, assistance, seed and fertilizers; by securing access to land; and by strengthening communities and social protection (‘social embedding’). Most criticized is the Bank’s unchallenged axiom of market participation, or better: the framing of the story of empowerment in the context of trade liberalization (Oxfam International 2007, Murphy and Santarius 2007).¹¹ According to its critics, the *World Bank Report* fails to come to grips with the new power relationships in the (world) marketplace (agro corporations), the vast asymmetries in market chains, and the question of equity in labor markets. Most importantly, it fails to interpret the food crisis as a crisis in both food security and food sovereignty.¹²

The liberalization of food markets and the expansion of the ‘corporate food regime’ over the last three decades have thoroughly affected the nature of food chains and the peasantry’s position. The policy of deregulating and opening up markets served the goal of fighting hunger by multiplying supplies and lowering prices. The stretching (and commodification) of food chains, the delinking of production from consumption and the concentration of decision making have generated an unprecedented flow of cheap foodstuffs while aggravating the vulnerability of our food regime (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b, Exenberger 2009). Unstable markets and price volatility affect the food security of millions of families. The remaining world peasantries find no protected place in the integrated global market and have to rely on ever more insecure income resources. These changes have affected the entitlement position (of food, income, access to land and credit, etc.) of an unprecedented number of people.

¹¹See also Murray Li *et al.* 2009 and Oya *et al.* 2009 (‘Rather, the report largely reads like a toolkit to enable development agencies, governments and other “stakeholders” to identify ways of using agriculture as an engine or facilitator of growth and poverty reduction’, p. 231).

¹²The concept of food security points at the availability of food. Food sovereignty sees food as a human right with ‘just prices’ and ‘just policies’ drawn on a deep, historical reservoir of moral economic sensibilities (Edelman 2005, 341). It prioritises local production over (cheap) imports, protection over open markets. It aims at a re-localisation of food power by rebuilding national food regimes (Holt-Giménez 2008, Patel 2006, 2007).

The fight against world hunger in the twentieth century has shifted the notion of protection or food security from the preservation of peasant bound production systems to general access to cheap market goods. This change came at a high price, primarily affecting the remaining peasant populations and the global commons (FAO 2008). The first twenty-first century food crisis revealed that the monomaniac policy of high production growth rates and low world prices is a dead end solution. It amplified the call for new, more powerful institutional arrangements that strengthen rural communities and national regulations in order to facilitate and strengthen the interests of small farmers and agricultural laborers. What is needed is not less but more protection of rural producers, local agricultural production systems and sustainable ecological development. This analysis fundamentally questions the traditional conceptualizations of development, food production and social protection. 'Development programmes' that were created in the last three decades and that leaned towards the European experience of the 'grand escape' have not solved the lingering question of food insecurity. On the contrary, they have aggravated the vulnerability of world populations, especially of the lowest 50 percent.

The siren song of Europe's 'grand escape'

In Europe, the classic famine crisis has been in retreat for three or four centuries. England and Northern Italy witnessed their last famines in the seventeenth century. Eighteenth and nineteenth century mortality peaks in France and the Low Countries were modest relative to previous centuries, even in the dear years of 1740–1741, 1794–95, 1816–1818 and 1845–1848. It seems that the European history of famine, except the Finnish hunger winter of 1868, ended in 1845–1848 with the 'big bang' of the Irish Famine, one of the most devastating food crises in world history. It is plausible to link this reduction of the risk of famine in (Western) Europe to gradual improvements in agricultural productivity, better communications and some gains, although modest and slow, in economic growth and living standards (Vanhaute *et al.* 2007, 35–6). Improvements in nutritional intake were tardy but substantial (Fogel 1992). However, they could not prevent the structural malnutrition of the bottom 20 percent nor could they stop the hunger catastrophe in the 1840s. As Walter and Schofield (1989, 46) have stressed, the disappearance of large-scale famines in England was related to the remarkable rise of agricultural production and to the reorganization and strengthening of local entitlement support: 'Protection against dearth and the provision of grain came publicly and formally through the system of communally organized and funded welfare provision represented by the poor law'. Changes in the social and economic order in Early Modern England transformed the pattern and degree of vulnerability from 'exogenous' epidemics and local food crises to new, structural forms of poverty and disease including airborne infections (Walter and Schofield 1989, 66–7). Proletarianization of labor and commercialization of goods and services created new forms of vulnerability such as insecure labor exchange entitlements and a growing dependency on often unstable markets. This created the need for new public goods and more protective systems.

Europe's 'escape from hunger' is an unprecedented achievement in world-historical perspective. After 1850 a massive increase in food availability went hand in hand with more food security, declining relative food prices and a declining agricultural population. This process could only be sustained in a rapidly changing,

globalizing and ever more unequal world. Being on the top of the international power hierarchy, Europe could support its process of de-agrarianization with massive, cheap imports of raw materials and basic food stuffs and an impressive export of tens of millions of surplus laborers to the ‘neo-Europes’.¹³ In some of these peripheries, former local and regional food regimes collapsed. As Mike Davis argued, ‘there is persuasive evidence that peasants and farm laborers became dramatically more pregnable to natural disaster after 1850 as their local economies were violently incorporated into the world market’ (Davis 2001, 288–91). The commodification of smallholder production, the addition of millions of tropical cultivators into the world market, and the weakening or destruction of local and state-level autonomy by colonialism and imperialism tended to undermine traditional food security outside Europe. ‘How do we explain the fact that in the very half-century when peacetime famine permanently disappeared from Western Europe, it increased so devastatingly throughout much of the colonial world?’ (Davis 2001, 8–9). By the early twentieth century, the UK imported more than 70 per cent of the grain, flour and dairy produce and 40 per cent of the meat it consumed (Arnold 1988, 70). This achievement legitimated the strong and appealing message that Europe sent out to the outer world, a combined message of modernization, depeasantization, industrialization and economic integration, tied together in a new ‘theory of progress’. At the same time, this message carried the promise of individual wealth and collective protection. The discovery of a ‘social question’ in the West is the basis of an integrative modernization paradigm. In the ‘global South’ this was translated in its most basic derivation as the ‘fight against hunger’ (Vernon 2007, 13–4).

It seems like the world history of famine had its final ‘big bang’ in the twentieth century. Absolute numbers of famine victims have never been higher (estimated at 70 to 80 million), with outliers in the USSR in 1921–1922 (six percent of the population) and 1932–1933 (four percent), Bengal in 1942–1944 (three percent), China in 1959–1961 (two percent) and North Korea in 1995–2000 (three to four percent).¹⁴ Twentieth century totalitarianism greatly increased the human cost of policy mistakes by governments. The damage caused by poor harvests was greatly exacerbated by political action. Famine-related mortality declined rapidly after 1960. Famines that killed more than a few percent of the total population became unusual (Ó Gráda 2002, 3). This, in turn, promoted the idea that the problem of famine could be solved. As Cormac Ó Gráda (2009, 3) stated, ‘In today’s developed world the conviction that famines are an easily prevented anachronism, and therefore a blot on global humanity, is widespread and gaining ground. That makes them a continuing focus for activism and an effective vehicle for raising consciousness about world poverty’.

The reduction of famine, and more broadly hunger, has become a central justification behind Europe’s ‘theory of progress’ as recently demonstrated by James Vernon (2007). Progress equaled the eradication of backwardness, personified by peasantries as relics of the past. The policy model of Europe’s ‘escape from hunger’

¹³Regions outside Europe dominated by Caucasians: North and South America, Australia, New Zealand. Today these regions produce more than 70 per cent of all wheat and maize exports, two of the three major grain crops. The term was coined by Alfred Crosby (Manning 2004, 52).

¹⁴See Ó Gráda 2007, 25–30. Between brackets the estimated excess mortality as percent of the total population. Compare to Ireland 1846–1852: 12 percent.

became hegemonic in the twentieth century, was implicated in the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and served as an ideological amplifier in the neoliberal age. The early twenty-first century food crisis is the most clear mark of its failure.

Old and new peasantries

During the last five centuries, historical capitalism gradually incorporated world peasantries into a new, globalized division of labor. New systems of production, including forced labor and cottage industries, transferred increasingly more wealth to the growing non-agricultural sectors and populations. Until very recently, peasant production, albeit more exploited than ever, was the major source of wealth in the world. At the same time, new forms of enclosure increasingly limited open access to land, to commons such as natural resources and collective knowledge, and even to family labor. This combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of this successful economic system. From this standpoint, the twenty-first century seems to become the era of 'the end of peasantries'. In 2007, the United Nations declared that for the first time in human history more than half the world's population was living in cities and towns (*State of World Population 2007*).¹⁵ Less developed regions will hit the halfway point later, but more than likely before 2020. Others are arguing that this century will witness a new turning point via a re-emergence of the peasantry. As a response to the agrarian crisis of the last decades, farming is increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way (van der Ploeg 2010). It is clear that the peasant is back, but what does this mean?

Three decades ago Teodor Shanin argued that:

... measuring peasant capitalism lies at the heart of the major concerns of contemporary social science. It has to do with capitalism as a process, it relates the understanding of the origins of our time to the characterization of the essential tenets of the global system we live in. (Shanin 1980, 89)

In his introduction on a reprint of Chayanov's *The theory of peasant economy* (Shanin 1986, 12) he added:

The only way to handle effectively contemporary social reality is through models and theories in which peasant family farms do not operate separately and where peasant economy does not merely accompany other economic forms but is inserted into and usually subsumed under a dominant political economy, different in type. Also peasant economies are being transformed (and even re-established) mostly by 'external' intervention, especially by the state and the multinational companies. ...

Peasants, he concludes, are neither remnants of the past nor victims of the present.

The search for 'other', 'backward', 'non-capitalist' characteristics and for separate modes of production has burdened peasant studies for a long time. This is especially true for its relationship with capitalism: 'Ultimately peasantry is considered as a class whose significance will necessarily diminish with the further development of capitalism, as occurred in Europe a century ago' (Owen 2005, 369–71). The alternative, according to Owen (2005, 379), is to build up 'articulated' social

¹⁵Data from *World Urbanization Prospects. The 2007 Revision Population Database* (<http://esa.un.org/unup>).

concepts: ‘The question is thus a matter of reintroducing a localized concept of peasantry whilst acknowledging the extent of changing capitalist relations in places of articulation’. This turns the peasant into a set of social relationships. The household is the basic economic unit and the gateway to the wider world. The peasant household is engaged in economic transactions for the main purpose of securing a level of subsistence, mostly within the framework of a market economy. That is why the concept of the peasant needs be contextually redefined in order to be sensitive to local situations and not to obscure non-capitalist entities into essentialist or dualistic frameworks such as agency–structure, west–rest, self–other, capitalist–non-capitalist (Owen 2005, 382).

Starting from the observation that peasants formed the vast majority of the population in agrarian societies ‘thereby sustaining and reproducing both themselves and the dominant classes and institutions, which extracted rents and taxes from them’, in his numerous publications Henry Bernstein asks the question, how we can perceive peasants as a social group within the contemporary deruralizing world (Bernstein 2006, 399)? He questions views that the peasantry constitutes a general (and generic) social ‘type’ or group, determined by a set of qualities, from household subsistence to village solidarity and to social/ecological harmony, and this opposed to other social groups such as rural proletarians and market-oriented farmers. This so-called ‘peasant essentialism’ is apparent in both historical (pre-capitalist remnants) and contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. “‘Peasants’ become petty commodity producers in this sense when they are unable to reproduce themselves outside the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production, when those relations and processes become conditions of existence of peasant farming and are internalized in its organization and activity’ (Bernstein 2003, 4). This model of peasant differentiation supplements the binary Marx/Lenin model, not by suppressing the peasantries but incorporating them (in scale and intensity) in a polarizing capitalist world-economy as producers of export crops, of food staples for domestic markets, and of labor power via (free or indentured) migrant labor systems (10). For more than a century now the debates about the ‘agrarian question’ or ‘peasant question’ have been dominated by two groups of protagonists, labeled by Farshad Araghi as teleological and essentialist. They both suffer from ahistorical and often functionalistic presumptions (Araghi 1995, 338–43). To avoid these we need a more differentiated view; ‘depeasantization has been neither a unilinear process, nor has it taken the historically particular form of differentiation in the countryside within each and every nation-state’ (p. 359).

Contemporary peasant studies since the 1990s have shown how useless binary, static concepts are when trying to understand the fate of rural and agrarian populations:

Peasantries are best understood as the historical outcome of an agrarian labor process which is constantly adjusting to surrounding conditions, be it fluctuations of climate, markets, state exactions, political regimes, as well as technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. These rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status only gradually over time. (Bryceson *et al.* 2000, 2–3)

The concept of depeasantization, often deformed to a major index of modernization, must be defined as a multi-layered process of the erosion of an agrarian way of life that combines subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labor and village community settlement

(Byceson 1999, 175). As Heather Johnson has stressed, the biggest problem with the concept of depeasantization is its (mostly inherent and often not explicated) links with urbanization, industrialization, development and marginalization. Measuring this process is difficult, not only because of the mentioned strategies of labor and income pooling within households, but even more so because seemingly concordant processes such as urbanization and migration can be part of rural income strategies. Depeasantization, according to Johnson, includes a diversification of survival coping mechanisms on behalf of the rural poor, such as petty commodity production, rural wage labor, seasonal migration, subcontracting to (multinational) corporations, self-employment, remittances, and income transitions (Johnson 2004, 56). Rural–urban migration patterns are often part of rural household strategies (as in the form of two-way remittances: income sent to rural areas, food sent to the urban family members) (61). What is often regarded as ‘depeasantization’ is, in essence, part of the labor and income strategies of the peasantry. Due to an increased marginalization and desperation for a growing proportion of the world’s population, these survival strategies are more important than ever. In his recent works Jan Douwe van der Ploeg coined these revived multi-level strategies of survival, autonomy and resistance as a ‘recreation of a peasant strategy’ (van der Ploeg 2010, 20–3).

The early twenty-first century has put the peasant back on the global agenda of governmental and non-governmental institutions alike. While the World Bank revalues smallholder farming as ‘a powerful path out of poverty’, it still follows the path of commodification and open markets (World Bank 2007). In our view a meaningful strategy of ‘peasantization’ has to be based on two main arguments. First, after five centuries of capitalism, two centuries of industrialization and three decades of neoliberal globalization, self-provisioning family farming continues to be a major mode of livelihood in the twenty-first century world. A large part of world food production remains in the hands of small-scale sustainable farmers, outside the control of large agribusiness companies or supermarket chains. Millions of small farmers in the South still produce the majority of staple crops needed to feed the planet’s rural and urban populations. Small increases in yields on these small farms that produce most of the world’s staple crops will have far more impact on food availability at the local and regional levels than the doubtful increases predicted for distant and corporate-controlled large monocultures (Altieri and Nicholls 2005). Secondly, ‘peasantization’ can be a powerful answer to real marginalization. Massive declines in the reliance on agriculture (de-agrarianization), erosion of the family basis of peasant livelihoods (depeasantization), and an exodus from the countryside (urbanization and growing slumps) are quickly redefining the place and the nature of peasantries. Vulnerability, the link between risk and the precariousness of people’s livelihood, has always been part of their existence. A diversification of income and coping strategies (individual, in the household and in the village) has been the main answer. However, a continuing erosion of the family basis of livelihoods has created new forms of vulnerability. According to Frank Ellis (2006, 393), vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being. This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification such as taking up non-farm activities and relying on non-farm income transfers. Rural household income becomes less based on farm activities and on the exploitation of assets. This erodes former household and village security mechanisms and affects peasants’ ability to overcome short-term economic stress, such as harvest

shortages or variations in income or food prices from one year to the next or within even shorter time spans (Bengtsson 2004, 33–5).

In order to report and understand old and new forms of vulnerability, especially regarding food security, we need to know how peasant populations have been coping with uncertainty and vulnerability in the past and the present. The main strategy has always been a mixture of diversifying the means of income; defending rights of access to resources, land and commons; and internalizing rising social and ecological costs. In the past, food shortages only became a famine when an accelerated process of rising individual malnutrition and household destitution concurred with societal breakdown. In most cases in history, famines had no lasting effects on societal developments or population growth (Devereux 1993, Howe and Devereux 2004, Ó Gráda 2009, 1–25). The threats to individual ‘lives’ (malnutrition, suffering) were usually countered by adaptations in peasant ‘livelihoods’ (informal and formal coping and protection systems). Famines triggered by harvest failures only occurred when societal institutions failed. The faltering or breakdown of markets, labor, credit and protection systems cut households off from their income and endowments. Individual, household and local coping strategies such as public credit, insurance and support systems (in other words, peasant survival systems) determined the outcome of a decline in food availability (Osmani 1998, 172–4, Skoufias 2003, 1087–102). Two decades of economic liberalization and institutional restructuring, and multiple and intensified involvement in markets – for commodities, credit, technology, land, and services of all kinds – have created growing and interconnected vulnerabilities and new risks. New forms of organized peasant reactions such as Via Campesina try to formulate an answer to the predominantly neoliberal mode of food production (Patel 2006, 84–5). Food sovereignty, control over one’s own food production and food markets, is put forward as an alternative for food security, a concept agnostic about food production systems. A call for localizing food power implies support for domestic food production and promotion of the return to smallholder farming (Holt-Giménez 2008, 13–4). At the same time, peasants’ rights are now defined as a set of ‘transgressive rights’, challenging the primacy of the nation-state and calling for international (international business) and even universal (human rights) spaces (Patel 2007, Edelman 2005).

Discussion

The range of famine prone regions in the world has been shrinking for centuries. It is currently mainly limited to sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the impact of endemic hunger has not declined and the early twenty-first century seems to be faced with a new threat: global subsistence crises. This essay aims to understand these seemingly unrelated processes. In an effort to bridge some disciplinary gaps, I have combined some insights from recent research about historical famines, about Europe’s ‘grand escape’, about the fate of past and present peasantries and about the state of twenty-first century food systems. These insights can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Food crises are community crises in which human suffering resulting from deficiencies in the food chain is reinforced or mitigated by local, regional or national systems of credit and protection.
- (2) The European model of escaping from famine included the dissolution of informal peasant systems of protection and the parallel edification of substitute

formal social security networks. This century-long process became one of the foundations of the Eurocentric modernization paradigm, both ideologically (theory of progress) and in practice (the transformation of colonial and global agriculture).

- (3) The new global food system and the 'discovering' of structural hunger mobilized huge capital transfers, which stimulated large-scale agriculture and worldwide food chains (Philip McMichael's 'food from nowhere'). This new step in the (corporate) globalization of the food regime amplified the European model of depeasantization and externalization of social (displacement) and ecological (degradation) costs.
- (4) Peasantries and processes of depeasantization and repeasantization are to be understood not outside but within the logic of historical capitalism. Growing pressure on peasant 'spaces' (protecting income and survival systems and access to land and natural resources) creates new forms of stress and vulnerability, as well as new repertoires of reaction and resistance.

The failures within the developmentalist model force us to question the standard rhetoric about famine, food and food producers. The new type of global food crisis compels us to take up the challenge of the quest for a new paradigm, based on historical and contemporary knowledge. Historical famine teaches us that local systems of protection, credit and access to resources were fundamental in the survival of peasant communities. The European project of eradicating both peasant societies and famine has been only partly successful, at the best. While classic famines have been in retreat for a long time now, the problem of hunger and food insecurity has only gained in importance. On top of this came the new global food crisis. Recent reports confirm 'the end of cheap food' and the persistence of high retail prices of agricultural foodstuffs for at least the next decade or so (OECD and FAO 2010). The 'food price crisis' of 2007/2008 turns into a structural and even systemic crisis (see also Johnston 2010, 69–71). It tears down the last pillar under the European development project based on a combination of open labor markets, generalized national protection systems and a general access to cheap food. While the prospect of access to a fair (family) wage income and to guaranteed social protection already dissolved in the 'lost decades' of the 1980s and 1990s, the structural break in the food price index in recent years demystifies the promise of the end of hunger via an open and global food market.

Ironically, this failure of the European modernization project has put back on stage those actors it supposed to have banned to history books, the peasants. Defined as a process, we learned that peasantries are no redundant class outside modernity, but that they create and recreate new frontiers within the world-historical capitalist system, via the organization of localized networks of survival, production, credit, protection and resistance. According to Jan Douwe van der Ploeg the twenty-first century re-emergence of the peasantry follows the same patterns of survival ('self-provisioning') and autonomy ('distantiation'), although in new societal settings. 'Today's peasantries are actively responding to the processes that otherwise would destroy, by-pass and/or entrap them' (van der Ploeg 2010, 2, 21). During the last five centuries, rural zones have been vital in the expansion of historical capitalism. Famine research and peasant studies inform us about this process of gradual incorporation. The twenty-first century food crises seem to be part of an era of 'bifurcation', a general systems crisis in which the former processes of

appropriation of wealth and diversion of costs run against their limits (Wallerstein 2008).

In Imperial Britain, the story of modernity became partially organized around the conquest of hunger (Vernon 2007, 4). After World War II, the new global community adopted the world food problem as a central political topic. By then a new understanding of hunger as a global social problem requiring government intervention had firmly taken root. Famine and hunger were perceived as remnants of the past, to be countered with modernization strategies adopted from the European experience. Green revolutions and market integration became the central leitmotivs, especially after the retreat of state interventions in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, we forgot the flip side of the European development model: an investment in strong and protective welfare states. Persistent absolute poverty rates and new rhetoric regarding poverty reduction in the early twenty-first century were the first signs of the limits of standard development schemes. The first global food crisis of the twenty-first century uncovered the flawed fundamentals under these policies. This, and by extension the social and ecological crisis of the capitalist world-system, forces us to rethink the traditional, dualistic perception of peasants in the modern world. Famines (societal crises well-defined in time and space) could be countered for the most part by internal survival mechanisms in the short-run and by new technological solutions (agricultural revolutions) in the long-run. The extent of a lingering global food crisis calls for answers that surpass this regional level. However, the global answer is rooted in local knowledge. A critical examination of the history of famines, the successive global food regimes, the trajectory of peasantries and the origins of the European model provides us with fresh insights that can help us supersede the dualistic lines of thinking that have been burdening our developmentalist perspectives for far too long.

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