Famine. A short history

By Cormac Ó Gráda
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Cormac Ó Gráda's long anticipated book on the history of famine is a historical standard work that brings together an impressive knowledge of past and contemporary famines. It is also a sign of our times; we currently need to rethink our conceptions about famine and food crises. This double ambition is clear on the first pages of the book when Ó Gráda links his aim of understanding why famines happened in the past with the pertinent question of why they are less frequent today. 'Writing about famine today is, one hopes, part of the process of making it less likely in the future' (p 3).

The book's scope is impressive. It includes ancient civilizations and the contemporary world; it covers North and South, East and West. The book is stuffed with facts and figures and countless examples, but there is no real time/space guided analysis. Most chapters cross several millennia and the seven seas, sometimes leaving the reader with a slight case of seasickness (for example on pages 197-200 when he discusses the role of elites in famine crises. Examples are given from Greece and Rome, from Mughal India, pre-Reformation England and Qing China.). The only real watershed in the story is the 20th century, a century of massive famines in the USSR, China and Africa; a century that Ó Gráda (and all of us) hopes marks the beginning of the end of famine as we have known it.

The 'global' character of the book is interwoven in its thematic outline. The timeless horrors of famine are revealed, as are prevention and coping strategies, the role of markets, governments and private action. The author's scope is limited by existing sources and literature. This is offset by the author's impressive knowledge of the mechanics of famine in general and of specific famines (primarily The Great Irish Famine). Though Ó Gráda's reading of economic, social, demographic, medical, biological and anthropological literature is truly impressive, the paragraphs and chapters based on personal research and re-interpretation are, in my opinion, the most insightful. The chapter on the Bengal crisis in the 1940s, a famine he has written about in previous articles, is by far the most straightforward in the book. On other pages Ó Gráda's statements are very general, even reductionist, but his comments on famines he has researched (such as the role of the British in the Irish Famine) are much more nuanced or much stronger (such as the role of the British in the Bengal Famine). Concerning the latter, Ó Gráda concluded that the main responsibility lay with the British colonial government: 'the two million and more who perished in Bengal were mainly unwitting, colonial casualties of a struggle not of their own making, that against fascism' (p 190).

The book is stuffed with information about what the author calls the 'horrors' or, more neutrally, the 'markers of famine' (suffering, mortality, crime etc.). It also includes coping strategies, food, markets, entitlements, 'the violence of government', and public and private action. The analytical framework focuses on (often non-linear) relationships such as famine and crime, famine and slavery, famine and prostitution, as well as famine and cannibalism. The book includes detailed information on famine demography: numbers and ratios, class, age and gender division (males are more likely to perish during famines than females, mainly for physiological reasons, p 99), missing births, causes of death ('the mechanics of mortality' in which the author distinguishes between ancient and modern famines (with less impact of infectious diseases)), and long term impacts (health, population growth, etc.). Coping and protection mechanisms include insurance and credit systems, demographic behavior, and migration patterns. Common misconceptions and generalizations are dismantled in the chapter about famines and markets. Ó Gráda claims that well-functioning commodity markets are a mixed blessing (p 151). The 'failure' of food markets wasn't per se the

reason for famines; the role of speculative hoarding was, at times, important (more so in 20th century famines than in the past). In an effort to balance all the evidence, the author states that the causality between good governance (or democracy) and the absence of famine in the 20th century is not one-way; in poverty-stricken, ethnically divided economies democracy may not be sustainable (p 231).

Famine. A short history engages in many vital debates about the past and future of societies. I want to address three issues. The first concerns the impact of famine and historical famine research. According to Ó Gráda, famines are short term regional events: 'famine refers to a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases' (p 4). To understand what makes a famine a famine we need more case studies of true famines and near-famines or non-famines. This will enable us to understand why food shortages (food availability) affect food entitlements and create suffering in certain circumstances and why they don't cause the dramatic breakdown of societal networks in other circumstances. This book makes the strong argument that the impact of famines on past societies is limited, certainly in the long-term: 'Demographic arithmetic argues against famines being as severe and as demographic corrective as Malthus and others have suggested' (p 36). Throughout history, food decline was countered with existing survival systems. We need to gain better understanding of why and how. Sources and literature often focus on the visible, but often atypical disasters. Regular markets, official actions and public rhetoric often eclipse our knowledge of individual, familial and local coping strategies. Food security is more than provisioning via official markets, transport systems and aid programs; it is also about controlling food. Most absent in this book is 'the local story', networks of credit and protection, the organization of local strategies, and the actions of local elites. Surely there is a sound self-interest in their actions (famines make the rich richer, p 194), but ample research shows that they are also vital in survival networks for common and poor people.

Secondly, the general frame of analysis breathes the optimistic air of societal modernization. Since 'famines have nearly always been a hallmark of economic backwardness', economic growth and better public governance will result in the end of famine. Nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism, imperialism and totalitarianism were serious setbacks; they were responsible for the worst famines in human history. However, globalization of the market economy has reduced famine prone regions to one continent (Africa) and has made famine an avoidable 'human disaster'. This general story raises some new questions, including the origins of famine (can they be related to the invention of agriculture, as Jared Diamond claims?), the actual occurrence of famines (the author states that existing research 'may be interpreted as tentative evidence that famines were less common in the past than claimed by Malthus or Braudel', p 35), and the impact of ideology and free markets. Although Ó Gráda evaluates the link between colonialism and famine as 'controversial and ambivalent' (p 19), he does not open the debate with authors like Mike Davis who explicitly linked the late 19th century famines with the expansion of the British empire and the capitalist world economy.

This brings me to my third remark, which is related to present and future famines as addressed in the last chapter, entitled 'An end to famine?'. Cormac Ó Gráda links the declining impact of famine from the middle of the 20th century onwards with economic and agricultural growth, the decline of totalitarianism, new medical technology and modern communication networks. These factors, together with lowered fertility rates and 'improved government', explain why famines will continue to become less probable in the future. The strongest possible setback is climate change and the threat of desertification. These rather optimistic prospects are in line with the official rhetoric of international organizations that currently focus on the eradication of 'remaining' poverty. It is not clear how this can be related to the danger of new food crises like the one we encountered in 2007-2008. Cormac Ó Gráda does refer to this crisis, but he seems to believe, at least in the first pages of his book, that famine is just the extreme end of a continuum line of hunger and malnutrition: 'The term famine indeed represents the upper end of the continuum whose average is "hunger". Malnutrition might be seen as slow-burning famine' (p 6). Yet on page 281 he claims that malnutrition is a distinct and more intractable issue. It seems to me that the global

transformations of the last decades have altered the danger of hunger, undernutrition and famine. The end of famine as we have known it might blind us to new and possibly much more widespread threats. To understand these threats, we undoubtedly can and must learn from the history of famine. In that respect, this book will be a major contribution for a long time to come.