

Resource reviews

Famine: A Short History By Cormac Ó Gráda

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Famine: A Short History is an impressive book written by Cormac Ó Gráda, professor of economics at University College Dublin. In his book, he examines the history of famine, drawing out commonalities and themes across geographical and historical contexts.

The book begins with a historical overview. It describes how individual famines are often known by specific names, such as Ireland's *bliain an áir* ('the year of slaughter') from 1740-41. Surprisingly this event was more deadly than the Great Hunger of Ireland from 1845-1852. The book details symptoms of famine, including rising food prices, food riots and a substantial number of actual or potential deaths from starvation. Due to the various scenarios in which famine can exist, a more precise definition is difficult.

Ó Gráda describes the impacts of acute food crisis on crime, infanticide, slavery, and details different coping strategies. Famine foods and other topics are described in a magisterial historical sweep. Examples of great selflessness and selfishness are catalogued, along with facts and statistics. Women are more likely to survive famines than men as they have higher fat reserves. Husbands starved for their wives; cases of murders and cannibalism occurred, even within families. In one Egyptian famine, people were reportedly plucked from the street with hooks into buildings. One survivor of the 1984 Ethiopian famine notes 'it was a time of hating – even your own mother'. A shocking photo shows a well nourished man stealing food from a starving child.

Famine can also be an opportunity for some, such as merchants who hoard food to charge higher scarcity prices and moneylenders that prey on people's distress. In some cases, governments have banned these practices, with counterproductive results. For example, the persecution of traders under

the Marxist Dergue (committee) in Ethiopia was partly responsible for the terrible famine there, as trading food became more difficult. However, famine also brings out human empathy. During *bliain an áir* according to one source, Dubliners ‘gave willingly gold and silver...making no distinction between Protestant and Papist’. The Choctaw Native Americans also provided money for famine relief in Ireland in the 1840s, only a few years after their own experience with starvation during the ‘Trail of Tears’.

Ó Gráda also discusses the contested relationship between colonialism and famine. It is a complicated one which has varied depending on the time period, the level of technology and the prevailing ideology in the colonial metropolis. By the twentieth century, the British state was less likely to tolerate famine in its colonies as a necessary evil to purge ‘over-population’, although the requisitioning of food for war was sometimes partly responsible for famines. The disruptions associated with World War II were implicated in the Bengal famine of 1943-4 in India, which receives considerable attention in the book.

He notes that there were ‘improvements in governance’ during the colonial era and that the end of colonialism in Africa brought the return of mass famine mortality, as a result of post-colonial complications such as civil wars. However, it can be argued that colonial policies of creating ‘tribes’ to divide and rule hardened ethnic dissention and laid the basis for subsequent conflict. The colonial state was no longer present to repress latent disputes by force. More detail on the economic and social structures underlying vulnerability to famine would have been interesting, but perhaps beyond the purview of the book.

Another impressive feature of this book is the incisive economic analysis brought to bear. Ó Gráda shows that in some cases, markets have been relatively efficient in reallocating food from surplus to deficit regions, whereas in others they were not. An important factor is identified as whether food deficit regions have sufficient purchasing power. As he notes ‘well functioning commodity markets are a mixed blessing when the distribution of income moves against the poor’. Food may be exported to the highest bidder, rather than sold locally.

On balance Ó Gráda is favourable towards the role of markets in food provision and distribution. He questions whether it would be too much

to hope that Africa can move away from subsistence agriculture and use the receipts from exports to buy food from other countries. However, it is possible that this might be part of the problem historically. African economies were structured under colonialism, and guided through more recent policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund towards 'free' trade and exports. Consequently the continent is now heavily dependent on food imports, which is now a source of substantial debt. For example, ninety seven per cent of poultry in Ghana is now imported, as compared to only ten per cent twenty years ago.

A United States (US) Senator is quoted in the book as saying 'food is power', and is consequently a national security issue. The US has in the past blocked food aid for political reasons, for example to stop Bangladesh trading with Cuba. It is certain that Europe would never accept not growing enough food to feed its own population.

Ó Gráda is critical in the book of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for over-selling the contemporary threat of famine in order to raise funds. However this 'over-selling' may also partly be due to the difficulty of defining and identifying a 'true' famine. It may also stem from the idea that it is better to err on the side of caution to ensure sufficient food supplies.

Despite the theme, this is a hopeful book. Modern famines claim fewer victims less murderous and their incidence is declining around the world. This is a result of the spread of economic development, the globalisation of relief efforts through NGOs and improved transport, information and technology infrastructure. However, there is no cause for complacency on hunger. As the proportion of malnourished people falls, their absolute number is growing.

Apart from the author's encyclopaedic knowledge, this book is distinguished by its attention to detail, insistence on evidence to back up arguments and clever structure which enables the reader to engage easily with cutting-edge arguments about the nature and evolution of famine. It is likely to become the standard academic text on the subject, but its accessible style, clarity and illustrations make it of much wider interest and significance. In terms of class usage it would be suitable as a text for courses related to food in economics, geography and other social science disciplines.

Ó Gráda, C (2009) *Famine: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

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