Book Review

Famine: A Short History, by Cormac Ó Gráda

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Reviewed by: William J. Moon

No discussion of access to food is complete without examining famine—an extreme case of food scarcity that has haunted human civilizations throughout history. In addition to creating victims of hunger-related deaths and plague, famine leaves an inerasable mark on human culture and community. The term “famine” is an “emotive one [in any language],” and many famines are remembered by specific names that hint at massive human suffering. Cormac Ó Gráda’s new book, Famine: A Short History, historicizes famine by studying cases from the earliest civilizations to more recent ones in North Korea, Malawi, and Niger. The book’s fresh contribution to the literature stems both from the impressive bank of world history that Ó Gráda concisely synthesizes, and from his use of non-conventional methodologies. These methodologies range from etymology to oral history and folk memory, each of which fill the knowledge gap that conventional history has left unanswered. This approach allows the author to test the validity of highly influential theories of famine set forth by such thinkers as Robert Malthus and Amartya Sen. Perhaps more importantly, it also allows the author to consider the future of famine in the age of globalization.

Ó Gráda starts the book by highlighting the human experience behind famine. Readers are immediately exposed to the grave symptoms of famine, which, besides death tolls resulting from hunger and disease, include increases in rates of crime, prostitution, and child abandonment. Ó Gráda notes Malthus’ observation that “[m]others [in China] thought it

3. Id. at 6.
4. Id. at 5.
5. Notably, Ó Gráda admits that the use of non-conventional methodologies likewise constitutes one of the book’s shortcomings. Id. at 42 (“Folklore is prone to forget the more distant past, however, and suffer from chronological confusion.”).
their duty to destroy their infant children, and the young to give the stroke of fate to the aged, to save them from the agonies of such a dilatory death." Hunger likewise forced many destitute women to enter prostitution, such as happened in China in the late-1870s and in India during the 1940s. Most recently, it was documented that hundreds and perhaps thousands of North Korean women illegally crossed the borders into rural China to engage in prostitution in an effort to stay alive during a massive North Korean famine in the 1990s. Rates of petty crime also increase, along with a heightened attentiveness to the protection of one’s property. On a cold night in 1848, for example, a farmer in Ireland “bludgeoned to death one Mary Ryan, a destitute woman, for stealing ‘a few sheaves of wheat’ from his farmyard.” Stalin’s decree of August 7, 1932 punished stealing with a sentence of death or ten years in prison, which led to over 200,000 imprisonments and ten thousand executions.

However astonishing these events may seem to modern eyes, they take a backseat when compared to the breakdown in the basic moral fabric of society that manifests itself in the form of suicide and cannibalism. In 1291 India, families drowned themselves in order to avoid excessive hunger. The Old Testament describes a mother who “shall eat [her children] for want of all things secretly in the siege and straitness...” At the height of a major famine in 1065, Egyptians sought to avoid men hiding with ropes “who latched onto passers-by, hoisted them up in a flash, carved up their flesh and ate them.” In the early twentieth century, a U.S. missionary organization in China reported authenticated cases of cannibalism in the New York Times. While it is notoriously difficult to decipher truths from half-truths and myths buried in these stories, the sheer amount of written history suggests that at least some form of cannibalism existed in many cultures across the world.

The book is perhaps of most relevance to the legal audience in its attempt to answer the question, “Is famine history in the modern world?” Although Ó Gráda does not provide a direct answer and notes the difficulty of making predictions, he focuses on recent statistics and the variables that play a role in inducing famines. In offering reasons to be optimistic, Ó Gráda notes the quintupled growth of GDP per head since

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6. Id. at 52, quoting THOMAS ROBERT MALTHUS, AN ESSAY ON THE PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION 109 (9th ed. 1888).
7. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2 at 60.
8. Id. at 50-51.
10. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2 at 62-63.
12. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2 at 64.
14. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2, at 2.
15. See, e.g., id. at 260 (citing infamous doomsday prediction by Stanford’s Paul Ehrlich, who “got it almost exactly wrong” when he forecasted in the late 1960s that hundreds of millions of people would starve to death in the 1970s).
1900, the dearth of despotic leaders like Hitler and Mao\textsuperscript{16} that were linked to some of the worst famines of all time, and the modern technologies that allow international relief mechanisms to react to famines more quickly.\textsuperscript{17} Ó Gráda’s optimism also stems from the Malthusian belief in the link between aggregate food supply and famine. Ó Gráda highlights, for example, that per capita global food output has risen by approximately one-third since the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{18}

Ó Gráda argues that the relatively recent globalization of public and private relief actions has also been a positive phenomenon. While the Irish famine of 1740-41, for example, generated little aid from outside the country, the Irish famine in the 1840s received support from across Great Britain and even $170 in contributions from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.\textsuperscript{19} During the Great Northern China Famine of 1876-79, Chinese expatriates from around the world sent money home, while the Russian royal family organized several domestic and international relief efforts in the early 1890s.\textsuperscript{20}

The 19th century seems to be the time period when telegraph and news media became global in scale, allowing bad words to travel fast and international relief to take prompt action. Ó Gráda emphasizes the importance of the technological landscape in the twenty-first century: “transmission of information is, or can be, instantaneous, and transport is relatively cheap and quick.”\textsuperscript{21} While Ó Gráda is critical of the bureaucratic inefficiencies of NGOs and un-altruistic motives of state donors, he seems to be satisfied with the general effectiveness of food aid. Ó Gráda notes, for example, that the improved nutrition statistics for children in North Korea offer reassuring evidence that “humanitarian aid has been reaching those who needed it.”\textsuperscript{22}

While factually correct, Ó Gráda’s analysis could be more rigorous by observing governance structures in hunger-prone countries. In a modern world characterized by a relative abundance of food, famines are most likely to strike in countries controlled by autocratic governments. Those states often have economies that are underdeveloped and autarkic, which allow the governing bodies to be insulated from outside influence. Importantly, the political costs of starving citizens in these states are drastically lower than in democratic states.\textsuperscript{23} In North Korea, for example, upwards of three million people—roughly ten percent of the entire population—died due to a famine that started in the mid to late 1990s, at a time when world food production per capita was reaching an all-time

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} This point seems a bit misleading, since tyrannical leaders like Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and Kim Jong-il of North Korea still govern sovereign nations.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ó Gráda, supra note 2, at 261-62.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Id. at 263.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Id. at 218.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Id. at 219.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Id. at 278.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Id. at 267.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} See, e.g., Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival 23-24 (2004).
\end{itemize}
Ó Gráda points out that famines occurring in peacetime have almost always been “exacerbated by corrupt and rapacious governing elites.” He also notes the “progress of democracy and relative political stability in Africa, where their absence often led to famines in the past.” Yet, Ó Gráda does not place enough emphasis on the political economy of autocratic governments, where the cost to governments in starving its citizens is almost negligible relative to the cost borne in democratic societies. In his seminal work, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Sen emphasizes the distributional aspects of food. Sen argues that democracies are much less likely to be affected by famine because starvation is a function of “some people not having enough food to eat . . . [not] the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.”

While Ó Gráda seems to agree with Sen’s entitlement theory, Ó Gráda gives more consideration to Food Availability Decline (FAD) theory, which claims that “famines occur if and only if there is a sharp decline in the average food availability per head.” For example, Ó Gráda argues that further analysis on the three cases highlighted by Sen—Bengal, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia—gives much more credibility to the FAD theory. While Ó Gráda sensibly argues this point, FAD may be less relevant than ever before in democracies, where free media allows bad news to travel fast, and significant political costs are levied upon leaders who starve their constituents. However, FAD would present significant problems for autocratic regimes, especially those like North Korea that insulate their economies from international trade.

With this in mind, can food aid be used as a tool of political leverage against autocratic governments? Ó Gráda argues that foreign aid, rarely disinterested, has widely been used as a source of political leverage. As an example, Ó Gráda considers the role that food relief played in overthrowing Béla Kun’s communist regime in Hungary in 1919. This point, however, is empirically questionable. In the recent North Korean famine, massive deaths due to starvation did not result in regime change or even destabilization. It is noteworthy that the North Korean regime refused to increase food imports even as hundreds and perhaps thousands of its citizens were starving to death. The situation remains the same to

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24. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2, at 264 fig.9.1.
25. Id. at 231.
26. Id. at 281.
28. Id. at 1.
29. Id. at 118.
30. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2, at 192.
31. Ó GRÁDA, supra note 2, at 227.
32. Id. at 227-28.
33. It is noteworthy that the costs to authoritarian regimes of providing basic public goods like food to its disenfranchised citizens are extremely low. See supra DE MESQUITH ET AL., note 23, at 10.
34. See William J. Moon, The Origins of the Great North Korean Famine, 5 N. KOREAN REV. 105, 115-16 (“[F]oreign aid workers were being expelled from the country, even when food
this day. In March 2009, North Korean officials kicked out five food aid
groups, even as one-third of the population is said to be in need of food
assistance.\textsuperscript{35} While improvements in technology have enhanced the world’s
capacity to assist famine-prone parts of the world, technology alone cannot
force autocratic governments to accept food aid.

What is the solution? Ó Gráda’s provocative look at the problem of
famine suggests that there are several potential tools available. One such
tool is eliminating or easing the various conditions aid bodies attach to
international food aid programs. Another potential tool is more effective
monitoring. Notwithstanding the many autonomy issues raised by aid
activity in sovereign countries, monitoring is, in certain important respects,
a good thing. Food distribution in authoritarian regimes might fail to reach
the neediest members of the population absent effective monitoring. This is
the problem of international aid diversion, where “not only do targeted
beneficiaries go without allotted food while the less deserving are fed, but
corrupt officials and others enrich themselves in the process.”\textsuperscript{36} In North
Korea, where international food aid is often diverted to support the army,\textsuperscript{37}
scholars estimate that the level of diversion reaches “perhaps 30 percent or
more of total aid.”\textsuperscript{38}

Then again, heavy regulation of food aid could lead to the
abandonment of aid altogether, since authoritarian regimes often face little
cost in starving their citizens. Alternate solutions offer some reason for
optimism. For example, international aid can focus on forms of aid that are
less appealing to elites, who often have access to more desirable food.
While there is always the risk that elites will sell such products on the
market, this may not be all that bad. In a market economy, an increase in
the foreign supply would shift the supply curve, decreasing the overall
price of food.\textsuperscript{39} This is the case even in communist countries like North
Korea, where a black market in food has come to complement or even
substitute the public distribution system. While this may not be the most
efficient way to save people’s lives, it may sometimes be the only way to
save lives in authoritarian regimes that have little incentive to feed the
starved.

All in all, while the book’s relatively short length prevents Ó Gráda
from deeply examining the future of famine, his work is an extraordinary
addition to the famine literature and should be of much interest to both
consumers and producers of famine scholarship. Ó Gráda’s ability to tackle
a very difficult subject in an engaging manner will especially be useful to
students and scholars who want a quick but comprehensive overview of
famine.

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\item[36] HAGGARD & NOLAND, supra note 1, at 108.
\item[37] Id. at 108-09.
\item[38] Id. at 109.
\item[39] See Moon, supra note 34, at 115.
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