

## CHAPTER THREE

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# Food Security, Safety, and Crises: 1920–2000

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Famines gather history around them.<sup>1</sup>

A history of the twentieth century is a history of hunger. Although modernity brought with it improved technical and logistical means of eliminating famine, nevertheless the century saw the greatest number of famine deaths in history. Famine-related mortality—not all from starvation—has been variously estimated, but a total of seventy-five million seems very likely (figure 3.1).<sup>2</sup> There has been some improvement. As Devereux points out, famines have now been absent from Europe for sixty years, from East Asia for fifty years (discounting the unique circumstances of North Korea), and from South East Asia in the thirty years since the horrors of Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> It is Africa where the problem has continued to be most troublesome in a post-colonial era of conflict and poor governance. Yet at the time of writing, among the fabulous wealth that has been created worldwide, there are still 857 million people chronically hungry—about one in seven, and rising.

There are many ways of writing histories in the epistemologically complex field of food insecurity. This chapter is organized as a series of tropes, in

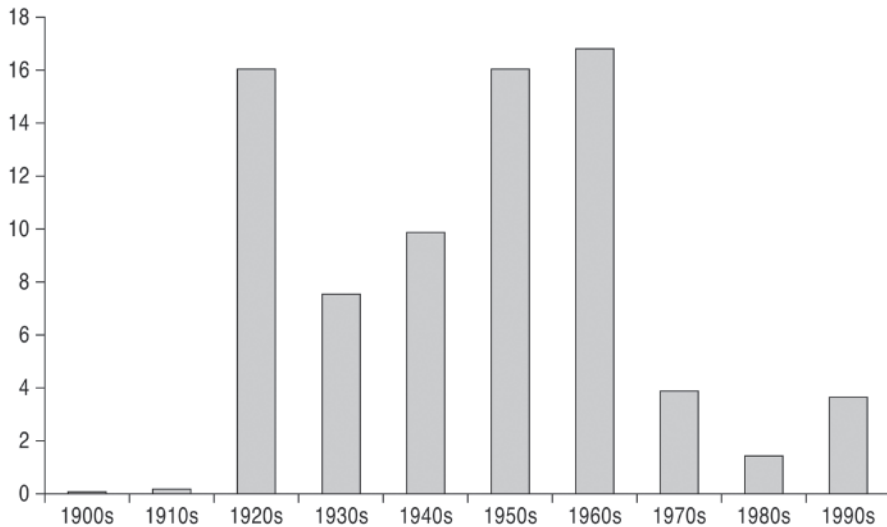


FIGURE 3.1: Twentieth-century famine mortality (in millions) by decade. *Source:* Devereux et al. 2002, 2. Reproduced with permission.

effect figurative distillations that amount to framings of the key actors. This will facilitate a novel cultural history. First, there is a consideration of those pockets of food poverty that persisted throughout the century in Europe and North America. This is followed by the role of conflict in exacerbating malnutrition, along with a discussion of what we may call famine crimes. Next, the mediatization of famine, and the creation of the victimhood of starvation are considered, with a brief theoretical meditation derived from welfare economics. The final trope is that of the administrators of improved quantity and quality—those representatives of the collective will of us all to see the elimination of food insecurity in all its forms. The irony for them, and for the chapter as a whole, is that new forms of hunger appear with each succeeding decade, so that our history, unfortunately, also has a future.

### HUNGRY PEOPLE AMONG PLENTY

It may seem strange to start a cultural history of food insecurity with an account of the Global North in the recent past and present, but it is important at the outset to unsettle any complacency about universal nutritional sufficiency in advanced economies. As early as 1939, John Steinbeck lifted

the lid on hunger in America with his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was soon made into a Hollywood film. This novel followed the Joads, a family of poor sharecroppers from Oklahoma forced to start a new life in California. Most novelists can only dream of having such an impact. The conscience of the world's richest nation was touched by the plight of the Joads and the many real-life victims of the 1930s dust bowl. Action was something else, however, and Marion Nestlé has shown that, subsequently, attitudes to malnutrition in America have gone through cycles of policy according to prevalent political priorities and ideological shifts.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic there were similar debates before World War II. The Hungry England controversy was especially lively from 1933 to 1938.<sup>5</sup> A number of prominent nutritionists and social-welfare campaigners argued that the diet of working people was inadequate. This was not just a matter of malnutrition in the sense of an imbalance of vitamins and minerals, but also an insufficiency of calorie intake—in other words, hunger caused by under-nutrition. The landmark assessment made by Sir John Boyd Orr in 1936 was that up to 50 percent of British people were affected, with consequences in terms of ill-health, inefficiency of manual labor, and intellectual under-achievement by school children. The government of the day opposed his interpretation on the grounds that poor diets were often the result of a lack of nutrition education and that each family bore the responsibility for making the best use of their resources, especially when these were meager. According to Mayhew, “officials maintained there was no connection between low income and malnutrition; if sections of the population were malnourished, then the fault lay with individual idiosyncrasies or ignorant housewives.”<sup>6</sup> Partly this attitude was to counteract the political impact of the hunger marches made on a regular basis by the unemployed in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Even today, thirty-six million Americans live in households that are food insecure.<sup>8</sup> This represents 17 percent of all children, 22 percent of black households, and 38 percent of households whose income is below the official poverty line. The food supply of one-third of these people is so insecure that they suffer malnutrition and severe health consequences, and the other two-thirds employ a wide variety of coping strategies, including participation in Federal food and nutrition assistance programs—National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—or attend charitable soup

kitchens. The main reasons for hunger in American cities are poverty, unemployment, high food prices, and housing issues such as the foreclosure of sub-prime mortgages during the financial crisis that began in 2007.

There is now a growing literature in various countries demonstrating hunger among marginalized and excluded groups, such as the homeless, runaway adolescents, and failed asylum seekers.<sup>9</sup> Such individuals are most at risk of food insecurity if they have mental-health problems, are infected with tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS, or have a drug habit.<sup>10</sup> There is an increasingly rich seam of field research with these people. Amistani and Terrolle, for instance, worked with *gleaners* in Paris, who cannot afford a balanced diet and who have a wide range of practices, legal and illegal, to supplement their resources.<sup>11</sup> These include begging, busking, eating while walking round a supermarket, the collection of out-of-date food from retail outlets, or simply theft.<sup>12</sup> Apart from the risk of malnutrition, diabetes and high blood pressure are common health consequences because many rely on energy-dense foods that are poor nutritionally.

Discussions of malnutrition in Western countries require some nuancing. Apart from the homeless, a literature has recently developed on food insecurity in so-called food deserts. These are inner cities and inaccessible rural areas where purchasing a balanced diet is difficult for the most economically disadvantaged groups in society. The problem may be immobility due to a physical disability or the lack of public transport, or it may be the result of food retailing becoming increasingly concentrated in out-of-town hypermarkets. There may also be a lack of affordable healthy foods, such as fruit and vegetables, by comparison with cheaper, high-energy junk foods.

Food deserts are a problem for marginalized groups in North American cities, but less so in Britain.<sup>13</sup> In both there is an increasing problem of obesity and all of the associated health risks. Researchers are now arguing that there is food insecurity in what they term *obesogenic* environments. These are poor city neighborhoods with a mix of factors that discourage exercise; for instance, where street crime means that residents minimize their outings or where there are few recreational opportunities but many fast-food outlets.<sup>14</sup>

### THE RATIONED, THE BESIEGED, THE REFUGEES

War, at both the global and regional scale, had several distorting impacts upon food systems in the twentieth century. The first, which we can term

*the act of omission*, resulted from lack of foresight or poor organization by combatant powers unprepared for the modern age of industrial warfare.<sup>15</sup> Under such circumstances of broken or disrupted food chains, people reverted to the wide variety of pre-industrial coping strategies that had been familiar to their nineteenth-century forebears. These ranged from dietary supplementation by foraging for wild or unusual foods, through to the sale of key assets such as livestock or even land. Migration to where there might be food was another option. The hunter-gatherer instinct remained strong throughout the period, as it does today, even in wealthy countries, where it now performs more of a recreational than a nutritional function. In wartime this supplied additional sustenance, such as mushrooms, small mammals, and freshwater fish. In Britain there were a number of schemes organized in World War II for the collection of wild fruits and plants. The fruits included blackberries, bilberries, cranberries, elderberries, rowan berries, and crab apples, all mainly gathered for jam or jelly-making.<sup>16</sup> Rosehips were also popular in syrup form for their vitamin C, and plants collected included foxgloves, sphagnum moss, and stinging nettles for medicinal purposes.

Employing an ethno-literature approach, Alicia Guidonet has analyzed Mercè Rodoreda's novel *The Pigeon Girl*.<sup>17</sup> This is about the Spanish civil war and is a rich source of information about food shortages in the time of civil disturbance. The heroine, Natàlia, loses her husband to the fighting and has to deploy a variety of strategies for survival, mostly through relationships of love and friendship. They are an alternative to collecting famine foods in the hedgerows and closely mirror the shared morality of reciprocity that one often finds among the dispossessed and the hungry. Guidonet has also collected oral testimonies about the civil war in Catalonia.<sup>18</sup> These, again, shed light on the moral economy, but they are stripped of any cozy altruism. Theft, swindling, and the black market all play a part in her stories.

In the first half of the century Europe contained many such vulnerable regions, with agrarian economies that were not self-sufficient in food production. The Tyrolean valleys of Austria may be prosperous today as a result of tourism, but in the early twentieth century they were economically marginal. In 1933, for instance, 50,000 people living there were said to be suffering a state of near-famine. Shortages were exacerbated during World War II and as late as the early 1950s in the Tyrol so that "people could hardly believe that hunger would not return."<sup>19</sup>

Among the unintended consequences of war, one of the most serious is the diversion of resources away from food production toward the war effort. Irrespective of the effect of bombing and invasion, there is often a decline in supplies, along with a diversion of foodstuffs to the armed forces. One estimate suggests that global food availability per head dropped by 12 percent during World War II, with much greater falls in Europe and East Asia.<sup>20</sup> This was despite efforts to restructure productive capacity. The United Kingdom, for instance, quickly geared its agriculture to the war effort and by 1943–1944 was producing 91 percent more in terms of the calorific value of net output than before the war.<sup>21</sup> This was partly due to a shift from livestock-based to arable agriculture and it was also the result of mechanization.

Around the world, in the first half of the twentieth century, two wars and a deep global economic depression left psychological scars and fears of continuing food insecurity. In Austria, Germany, and other war-torn countries in Europe, the return of prosperity meant the onset of what has been called the *1950s syndrome*. This was a compensatory expansion of calorie intake (the *fresswelle* or eating wave) that was a celebration of the possibility of eating. Waistlines expanded, giving the first inkling of the trend toward obesity that has now reached worldwide epidemic proportions.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that many food and agricultural politics in the second half of the century were a result of the earlier worries. By way of example, the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union came into being as a means of solidifying peace through the guarantee of sufficient food from its own resources. As a result, consumers had to put up with higher prices to subsidize farmers and the politics of this historical dynamic have rumbled on into the twenty-first century.

More sinister among the consequences of war are the *acts of commission* that caused such great suffering. These fall into several categories. First, there is the deliberate severing of food supplies to a region, as happened in the Dutch hunger winter of 1944, when a strike by railway workers was punished by the German army.<sup>23</sup> Their closure of supply routes caused at least 20,000 deaths. Second, starvation was at times part of a strategic plan to weaken the enemy and undermine morale. Leningrad was blockaded in this way by the Wehrmacht from 1941 to 1944, one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history. Up to one million died of starvation and

there were many others who suffered from long-term mental and physiological damage as a result of malnutrition. The siege of the Warsaw Ghetto (1940–1942) was even more despicable because it was a racially motivated attempt to starve over 400,000 people, mainly Jews, who were crammed into a small neighborhood of the city. At least 100,000 died there of hunger and disease. Such painful memories explain why hunger and starvation are not common as autobiographical or even fictional subjects.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of recording the evil of genocide has at least guaranteed it a place in the Holocaust literature. One of the most famous examples is the first-hand account of the ghetto by Emmanuel Ringleblum.<sup>25</sup>

Deprivation during occupation, either deliberately punitive or due to incompetent administration of scarce resources, is another act of commission. One shocking example was the conquest of Greece (1941–1944) by Italy, Germany, and Bulgaria, which cost 250–450,000 deaths by starvation because of a trade blockade by the British and a collapse of the food economy due to low productivity, hyper inflation, and passive resistance among public servants.<sup>26</sup> Other occupied countries were actively exploited, for instance, Denmark and France, which between them supplied over half of Germany's food imports by value from its tributaries in 1942–1943.<sup>27</sup> The Danes operated this system efficiently themselves,<sup>28</sup> with minimal interference, but the situation in France was less manageable. The occupation there was complicated by the division of the country into zones, with the semi-autonomous Vichy administration in the south and east. Official rations gave working adults at best 1,500 calories per day; falling to below 1,000 calories in 1944.<sup>29</sup> Supplementing this with officially sanctioned or illegal sources occupied a great deal of people's time and tested the traditional moral values of French culture. One curious feature was that food parcels of up to 50 kg could be sent through the post, with the result that family networks in town and country were mobilized, as never before, to provide mutual support. Nevertheless, naturally rich agricultural regions were significantly less affected by food insecurity than their urban and industrial counterparts because farmers dispatched less to market and fell back on subsistence for self-preservation. What was left of the prewar integrated food system was tightly controlled by the Germans, who dictated prices and rations for particular commodities. The dark side of rationing was the inability of certain isolated and marginalized groups to fend for

themselves, such as the elderly, the sick, and the inmates of mental asylums, 45,000 of whom are thought to have starved to death.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to say that rationing always leads to extreme hardship and malnutrition. Examples of successful policy-making exist, for example in Britain during World War II, where shortages during the U-boat campaign in the Atlantic threatened the survival of a nation that had previously been heavily dependent upon imported foodstuffs. A so-called food front was opened up that included much propaganda and a myth was created of a carefully planned diet that, in reality, was more a matter of muddling through. A key food was the national loaf—wheatmeal bread that was disliked by consumers but had the virtue of a high extraction rate from flour and therefore had improved vitamin and fiber content.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the stringencies of rationing, wartime can sometimes be an opportunity for innovations. This is particularly the case with policy-making, where peacetime vested interests are temporarily silenced and progressive ideas can be experimented with. Deborah Dwork picked up this idea in her book *War is Good for Babies*, where she argued that welfare foods and mother and baby support services were available during World War I in Britain to a level that politically would otherwise have been impossible.<sup>32</sup> Other innovations have been technical. For instance, the Third Reich placed food research at the heart of its war planning, and achieved much in the fields of frozen, dried, and powdered foods. These were not necessarily new technologies, but the scale of investment and drive of the military-industrial complex meant a more rapid uptake than would otherwise have been the case.

After the conclusion of the war, like many other German cities, Berlin was short of food. Allied commanders had great difficulty in sourcing raw materials, especially during the Soviet blockade of 1948–1949, when they resorted to an airlift on an unprecedented scale. They also found it difficult to control a vigorous black market, which, at one point in 1948 is estimated to have handled between one-fifth and one-third of the food supply. Hunger challenged normal views of morality, and criminality was not only widespread, but at times condoned. Cardinal Frings of Cologne, for instance, in 1946 preached a temporary suspension of the seventh commandment that “thou shalt not steal.” His concern was for the welfare of ordinary people but this was misinterpreted by many, to the extent that any act of theft became known as a *Fringsen*.<sup>33</sup> Other antisocial behavior,

Table 3.1: Estimated impacts of African conflicts, 1970–1993

	War Years	Average difference (%) in food production between peaceful and war years
Angola	1975–93	–44.5
Burundi	1972, 1988–93	–5.6
Chad	1980–87	2.2
Ethiopia	1974–92	–10.9
Ghana	1981	–9.5
Kenya	1991–2	–3.4
Liberia	1985–8, 1990–93	–25.5
Mozambique	1981–92	–5.0
Nigeria	1980–81, 1984, 1991–2	–4.3
Somalia	1988–93	–23.1
Sudan	1984–93	–18.5
Uganda	1971–87	10.2
Zambia	1984	–13.7
Zimbabwe	1983–4	–19.8
All		–12.3

Source: Messer et al. 1998.

such as hoarding and foraging, was difficult to control, but far more significant was what Paul Steege calls the *economy of connections* that ensured better access to food for the articulate middle classes.<sup>34</sup> This networked dimension of food security in times of crisis is under-researched and opens out into debates about social capital, everyday collective knowledge, skill banks, informal circuits of exchange, and a morality that is negotiable according to circumstances.

Official histories of war rarely mention black markets or sharp practices, such as overcharging or favoritism in situations of shortage.<sup>35</sup> However, popular oral histories tell a different story. Mark Roodhouse recounts some stories about Britain during World War II and concludes that there was plenty of scope for evading the detail of the rationing system.<sup>36</sup> Having said that, he argues that black markets were deeper and more widespread in the occupied and liberated countries, and even in the United States, than in Britain. Attempting to explain this in terms of the cultural context of private morality is fraught with complexity.

In the second half of the twentieth century the type and location of warfare changed, away from the industrial scale of the European theatre to guerrilla conflicts in Asia, and civil wars and insurgencies in Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s these were ideologically driven, fuelled particularly by the Cold War, and food insecurity was not only a common consequence but also, in many cases, a deliberate policy.<sup>37</sup> The United Nation's estimate is that from 1970 to 1997 \$121 billion worth of agricultural production was lost around the world due to armed conflict; this has resulted in the lowered availability of daily energy supplies (table 3.1).<sup>38</sup> Scanlan and Jenkins concur with the scale of these losses in their survey of the experiences of seventy-five less developed countries, but they also find that militarization and military rule are not *always* necessarily bad for food security.<sup>39</sup>

### THE FAMINE-STRICKEN

There have been many popular imaginaries of hunger. James Vernon argues that famine was discovered as a humanitarian concern in the nineteenth century and he gives examples of various devastating famines in South Asia that became widely known through journalism.<sup>40</sup> Then, during World War I the trope of victim took on a new power when it was realized that the Entente blockade of Central Power countries was causing near-famine conditions. The Save the Children Fund (SCF) was set up in 1919 to relieve this suffering and was also soon active in the famine that accompanied the civil war in Russia of 1921–1923. The SCF deployed *claims' making* strategies to attract the attention of governments and media, providing them with the motivational frames that they required.<sup>41</sup> There was an emotional element to their campaigning but they also carefully nurtured the notion of so-called deserving victims—a familiar moral stereotype of the day.

Photography also transformed the representation and understanding of food insecurity in the twentieth century. A “spectacle of suffering”<sup>42</sup> was created and gradually absorbed into the general critique of Western hegemony in Asia and Africa. Michael Buerk and Mohamed Amin's BBC/NBC television report from Korem on the Ethiopian famine in 1984 was particularly iconic and was watched by an estimated 470 million people around the world.

Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the 20th century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death.<sup>43</sup>

This generated an immediate response, including the fund-raising concert Band Aid. But imaging hunger can also have negative consequences. Pictures of starving children have become so widely consumed that there is a danger of stereotyping Africa as unproductive, weak, and unable to sustain a modern economy and lifestyle. Such images encourage a reductionism that we, as lazy voyeurs, accept and then fail to look for the tremendous variety of experience and resilience in that continent. Still photography (figure 3.2) and TV news packages come pre-digested and do the work for us. Even the illustrated campaign literature of aid agencies, though well-meaning, is often complicit in this uncritical approach to hunger. The point here is that the visual image is prone to what we might call the inductive fallacy of seeing: that one shot stands in as representative of a wider truth. For our purposes this poses a dilemma. Have journalistic and academic analyses of twentieth-century famines discursively contributed to the construction of a popular impression of passivity and hopelessness in poor countries or have they have shone a light on a problem that would otherwise have been unseen? Either way, David Campbell sees photographic images of war or famine as part of a broader visual economy, and we can add to this that editorial selection of what to publish reifies a set of market forces that filter our knowledge of these events.<sup>44</sup>

The style and content of images has evolved during the twentieth century. The Holocaust was one influence, with its depictions of emaciation, and modern-day photography uses these as reference points, if only sub-consciously. But over-familiarity can lead to compassion fatigue and there is no doubt that the media are having to try harder to shock us.<sup>45</sup> In 1994, for instance, the *New York Times* published a picture of a starving child collapsed on the ground with a vulture watching her from a few feet away. The photographer, Kevin Carter, won a Pulitzer prize for this image but he was heavily criticised.<sup>46</sup> This raised the knotty issue of whether a photographer is just a witness or has some responsibility for her/his subject.



FIGURE 3.2: Photographers' take pictures of a starving child during the 1992 famine caused by the civil war in Somalia, 1992. © Paul Lowe/Panos Pictures Mogadishu, Somalia, 1992.

The idea of the famine victim has also been developed in various types of literature. Starting in the 1920s, we can see that Walter Mallory's book *China: Land of Famine* demonstrates early sophistication in the depiction and analysis of hunger.<sup>47</sup> As Secretary of the China International Relief Commission, he was in a good position to take an overall view of the country most at risk in that decade, and this enabled him to present a multi-factorial interpretation that included economic, environmental, political, and social causes, along with his suggested cures. China was certainly in the front line of disasters in the interwar years, with major floods in 1924, 1931, 1933, 1935, and 1939, and droughts in 1920 and 1928–1930, with a consequential mortality of eleven million.<sup>48</sup> However, it was not until the 1931 novel, *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck, that the human element of famine in China was appreciated in the wider world. Buck's was one of the twentieth century's best known books on food insecurity, and it won her the Nobel Prize for Literature.

China continued to feature in the famine imaginaries of the second half of the twentieth century. This was mainly due to the Great Leap Forward famine of 1959–1961, which, it is estimated, claimed thirty million lives, making it the most deadly famine in history. Until the 1980s, relatively little was known about this in the West, hence the subtitle of Jasper Becker's book—*Mao's Secret Famine*.<sup>49</sup> Since then, oral testimony has come forward, as used by Ralph Thaxton in his account of Da Fo village in Henan province, where there was hardship but also a range of coping strategies, such as remittances from relatives, illegal labor migration, begging, and even the theft of crops from neighboring villages.<sup>50</sup>

In the physical sense, hunger was, of course, a driving force behind Mao's revolution, but at the same time in party propaganda it was not rated as highly as the political hunger of the revolutionary spirit. Jung Chang successfully renders the tension between the ideological imperative of the Cultural Revolution and its devastating consequences in her factional family autobiography, *Wild Swans*. This has the primary aim of unmasking the inherent chaos of this period of China's history, but readers all over the world also learned about the widespread hunger in the ten years up to Mao's death in 1976.<sup>51</sup>

Theorizing the structure and causality of such famines and hunger was problematic until recently; one thinks of the many population and resource frameworks rooted in the thinking of Thomas Malthus, for instance. This began to change in the 1980s when Amartya Sen saw that famines can happen where there is no shortage of food.<sup>52</sup> Sen grasped that the *exchange entitlements* of individuals or households—in short their access to food—is the key to whether they starve, and not the amount of food in the local warehouse or shop. This entitlement can be eroded by a loss of bargaining power in the market, for instance, by unemployment or rising prices, or, in the non-monetary sense, by the denial of traditional community-support mechanisms.

Sen's book received name checks right across the food insecurity literature and his work has influenced international aid thinking over the last thirty years. Despite this, critical scrutiny suggests that his examples work best as particular types of famine in particular socio-economic contexts.<sup>53</sup> These are mostly peasant societies with private property and some engagement with market-based exchange, where a shock to the system has reduced employment opportunities or inflation has made basic foodstuffs

unaffordable. Sen's approach is less predictive for pre-capitalist societies dominated by common property resources and in famines under centrally planned socialism.<sup>54</sup> He is least effective in dealing with famines that occur in times of civil conflict and war because his theory makes the assumption of stable, legal-based entitlements. He is also convinced that democratic institutions are a powerful anti-famine tool because political and media debate will hold the state and its agencies to account, but in reality there are many examples of widespread chronic hunger in liberal democracies.<sup>55</sup>

A number of improvements to Sen's original framework have been suggested. One of the most important is the need for a greater awareness of culturally and socially embedded variations in consumption practices. For instance, we know that people often choose to reduce their food intake as a means of minimizing the risk to their family's long-term endowments, such as land or other key assets. This *choosing* to starve is different from the *having* to starve of a famine, but it may not necessarily be altruistic.<sup>56</sup> Weaker and marginal family members usually suffer first and most, with gendered outcomes that favor the interests of productive adult males.

Another crucial extension of Sen is the recognition of non-market methods of getting access to food. These are based on whatever social relations and networks each household can call upon in time of need. They may be far-reaching but there is plenty of evidence that they may be eroded in circumstances of exploitative exchange relations, or insensitive and disruptive political control. Watts' in-depth analysis of the moral economy of Hausaland showed that reciprocity had broken down under colonial rule.<sup>57</sup> To add to this, in the quarter of a century since this pioneering study, there has been a 'network turn' in sociology and human geography, so that now we have a much better understanding of how food-insecure families draw upon their social capital and devise a wide range of coping strategies to maintain themselves in the long-run.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the humanitarian aspect of food insecurity has been reinvigorated through a debate about the *right to food*. For some time international law has seen this as an inalienable human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, but implementation has been slow and patchy. Some observers argue that in the case of famine there is always liability, at the very least for negligence or occasionally for genocide, justifying action by the International Criminal Court. This begs a new kind of question: who benefits from famines?

In retrospect, there are many examples of such crimes. In the years 1932–1933 in the Soviet Union, for instance, particularly in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, there was widespread famine and a total of between five and seven million people died following the forced collectivization of agriculture. Whether this was a deliberate policy to suppress peasant resistance to communism, or the tragic coincidence of a number of unforeseen circumstances is still a matter of bitter controversy.<sup>58</sup> It was impossible in Stalin's time to seek answers because the subject of famine was taboo, to the extent that the population even suppressed their own memories and grief.<sup>59</sup>

One can certainly envisage that famine denial might be a crime. In the Sudan, for instance, the government failed to acknowledge a drought-related famine in 1984–1985—a tragic mistake that cost a quarter of a million people their lives. More recently, in 2004, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that “genocide has been committed in Darfur and the government of Sudan and the *janjawiid* [Arab militias] bear responsibility.”<sup>60</sup> He was referring to the government's counter-insurgency by proxy, which has used famine as a weapon. Alex de Waal points out that the verb *to starve* is transitive in Sudan and to most outsiders it would certainly appear that crimes have been committed against humanity in this dirty war. However, it is notable that the indictment against Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, President of Sudan, issued in March 2009 by the International Criminal Court, did not mention the use of famine as a weapon in its listing of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Recently, famine theorizing has incorporated legal arguments on genocide and negligence. This is constructivist thinking that seeks to identify the human fault of omission or commission and to apply remedies through international courts.<sup>61</sup> In this dark vision, there are *beneficiaries* of famines.<sup>62</sup> Ignoring opportunities to prevent famine is culpable and a number of small acts together may amount to the active manufacture of hunger and starvation.<sup>63</sup> In extreme cases this may amount to genocide and all of these famine-creating and famine-perpetuating activities are crimes against humanity.

## THE INTERVENTIONIST AND THE REGULATOR

The Foucaultian perspective of governmentality is appropriate for understanding responses to food insecurity from the nineteenth century onward.<sup>64</sup> Through the medium of state biopolitics, we have become aware

of the need to collect data on food production and bodily nutrition. It was in the twentieth century that ministries of food were established in many countries and sample surveys initiated in order to monitor the variety and balance of diets across a suitable demographic range, and to provide a basis for food and public-health policies.

A development in the 1920s and 1930s was the increasingly loud voice of scientists arguing that the newer knowledge of nutrition, especially the role of vitamins in bodily health, should drive policy and underlie the nascent “international food movement.”<sup>65</sup> A number of them advised the League of Nations, including Sir John Boyd Orr, who later went on to lead the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (1945–1948). Orr had a global vision of helping the malnourished but he found neither the British or American governments willing to support his idealistic plan for a World Food Board, and so he resigned. Postwar attitudes to food insecurity instead evolved slowly within a fragile social-welfare consensus. Coupled with decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, this eventually pulled the center of gravity of famine relief to what by then was known as the *third world* and the modern era of emergency disaster aid and development had begun.

One aspect of development was charitable disaster relief; for instance, the origins of Oxfam in 1942, which was started to help the victims of the famine in Greece. Later known as non-governmental organizations, there has been a proliferation of such humanitarian initiatives. After the war they were joined in the field by international agencies devoted to development and disaster relief, such as those of the United Nations and World Bank, either funding emergency feeding or long-term projects to increase food production. In terms of bilateral relations, America led the way with the postwar Marshall Plan (1947–1952) and Public Law 480 (1954), which was an important foundation stone of international food aid, soon followed in the 1960s by the formation of many national aid agencies. In recent years there has been a widespread recognition of a human *right* to food and the development of a strong literature on the ethical case for assistance.<sup>66</sup>

No history of food in the twentieth century would be complete without a comment on food quality and safety. These concepts changed so fundamentally that, in a way, they are metaphors for the century itself. In

1920 it is probably fair to say that modern consumers were deeply cynical about their food supply, partly because of the disruptions of war, but at a deeper level because there were worries about food poisoning and the adulteration of foodstuffs inherited from the nineteenth century. Many of these were scandals about the manipulation of food composition, by the addition or extraction of ingredients—for instance, the watering of milk<sup>67</sup>—but there were also concerns about the simulation of expensive items by what came to be called the process of *falsification*. In France the main concern was wine. Their law of 1905—which later became the basis of European Union food-standards’ legislation—was an outcome of this, and the United States’ Food and Drug Act followed in 1906. Both were influential in eliminating the worst abuses. Progress has been slow in the Global South although, encouragingly, in countries such as India and China, the media have played a role in uncovering scandals about poor food quality.

One point to make here is that the branding was introduced to give consumers confidence in their favorite processed foodstuffs. Companies were successful if they could convince the public that such trust was justified, and the manipulation of ingredients that previously might have been thought of as adulteration, was increasingly seen to be a means of creating distinctive products.<sup>68</sup> A second point is to note the rise in the 1920s and 1930s of attentive publics demanding better quality food at an affordable price. Some were activists in consumer organizations, such as cooperative societies; others demanded free trade in the hope of accessing food from all over the world; and still others wanted tariff barriers to protect their jobs.<sup>69</sup>

The period 1920–2000 witnessed several reassessment phases of food quality and therefore food security. Two in recent decades have been the public’s wariness about agro-chemical residues and the use of processing additives, which together have encouraged the beginnings of a demand for organic foodstuffs, and also the frenzy associated with mad cow disease (1984 onwards), salmonella in eggs (1988), and many other infective agents.<sup>70</sup> According to Ulrich Beck, these are representative of a new phase of modernity, which he calls the “Risk Society.”<sup>71</sup> Food scares, he claims, have undermined public trust in the regulation of quality and purity by the state and in the reliability of scientific expertise.

## THE FUTURE

Food is, of course, a cultural marker of great significance, to the extent that it is a contributory factor in identity formation, both individually and collectively. An insecurity of supply may, then, present a fundamental challenge, not just physiologically, but also psychologically. In some societies the presence of hunger today is so uncomfortable that there may be denial, and memories of food insecurity in the past are sometimes deleted.<sup>72</sup> In others, famine is a hitching post of history and a constitutive part of the values and metrics through which the world is understood. Either way, the latest literature demonstrates the complexity of the livelihoods involved and calls for multi-factorial studies of household livelihood dynamics through time and across space.<sup>73</sup> It seems that there is a potentially important research agenda here for historians and geographers.

In future, researchers will need to pay more attention to the new famines that appeared at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>74</sup> These complex emergencies are presently the biggest global risk to food security.<sup>75</sup> They are often conflict-related but the spread of HIV/AIDS has been another major factor.<sup>76</sup> On its own this disease has significantly reduced productive capacity in several African countries; it has also increased dependency ratios and made care of the sick a major burden. Often, family decision makers are affected by the disease but it is their dependents, including a generation of orphans, who are most susceptible to malnutrition. Other new famines include an excess mortality of hundreds of thousands in Iraq during the period of UN trade sanctions, 1990–2003, and as a consequence of other economic crises, such as in Indonesia (1997), Russia (1998), Argentina (2001–2002), and many others in the so-called credit crunch of 2007–2010.<sup>77</sup> Contemporary cultural histories of food insecurity have a profound significance in helping us to understand the perplexing continuation of this fundamental issue, and one way to achieve this is by acknowledging the variety of circumstances in which shortages and poor-quality diets arise.