

Entitlements or Empowerment? Famine and Starvation in Africa

Michael Watts

Famine and the crisis of African development have become inseparably linked in popular writing. Visual images of starvation are the icons of African failure, yet they have a dispelling quality accusing everyone and no one. This article reviews recent research on the genesis, dynamics and consequences of famine in Africa. While the entitlement approach to starvation associated with Amartya Sen has proven most helpful it must be situated on the larger political economic canvas by which entitlements and endowments are distributed and fought over - class relations. Food crises must be rooted in what Sen calls the 'totality of rights' not entitlements in a narrow legal sense. This provides an important link between famine, food security and democratization in Africa.

Hunger lies. It simulates being an insoluble mystery or a vengeance of the gods. Hunger is masked, reality is masked (Eduardo Galeano, 1990:15).

The African food crises of the 1980s have been distinguished by something of a seachange in international perceptions of famine. The Report for the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, 'Famine: a Man-Made Disaster', posits, like other popular books by The World Commission on Environment and Development and Food First, that famine was 'man-made'. In sharp contradistinction to the Club of Rome and the Brandt Commission, 'Famine: a Man-Made Disaster' rejected the meteorological and demographic explanations of African hunger. A foreword by Dr David Owen, former British Foreign Secretary, makes startling reading, perhaps because it resembles more than anything else a measured marxist reading of the work of Amartya Sen! Famine emerges, he says, from the particular conjunction of a colonial legacy, the ineptitude of 'development experts' and human mismanagement of the market, not from a malevolent nature.

In our historical lexicon, famine is indelible, emotive and pervasive; it is, and always has been, the very stuff of history. In this sense, major subsistence crises, whatever their particular causality or meaning are extensions of lived experience, what David Arnold (1988:91) refers to as 'intensifiers'. Famine contains the terror of the possible; however horrific and traumatic, societies will not, indeed cannot, act entirely out of character during famines. Food crises are exceptional events, but are rooted in the subterranean structures of the present; as R.H.

Tawney observed half a century ago, famine is the final stage of a disease which, though not always conspicuous, is ever present. As a calamity it affords us the opportunity to grasp in a more profound sense the structure of society itself in the same way that disease permits the physician better to understand the secret life of the body.

Yet the secret life of famine, in Africa and elsewhere, still remains in shadow if not entirely hidden. If there is a growing sentiment that African hunger is 'man-made', Rangasami is surely close to the mark when he observes that our biggest failing remains 'the inability to recognize the political, economic and social determinants that mark the onset of the process' (1985:1747). There is a profound irony in that such a failing marks an era which has the odious distinction of being a period in which more people will die of famine than in any previous century (according to the Feinstein Hunger Program, the trend in famines since 1945 is 'clearly downward', and refers to 'average population residing in countries reported with famine' (*New York Times*) and is in my opinion open to serious dispute. See also 'The Hunger Report: Update 1989'). It is an era, moreover, in which famine is more preventable than ever, in which abundance and surplus in the advanced capitalist states has reached unprecedented levels, and in which North-South inequities are ever more vivid and untenable. In 1988 an estimated 480 million people live in countries where crops and import capacity failed to meet their usual levels of consumption and five countries with a combined population of 204 millions failed to prevent famine within their national borders (Feinstein Hunger Program, 1989:5); 455 million people live in households too poor to obtain the energy sufficient for minimal activity among adults and for the healthy growth of children. These food poor, impoverished households are primarily in Africa and South Asia and their number has almost certainly grown.

However laudable the humanitarian efforts, it is salutary to recall that the Ethiopian famine relief of BANDAID and 'We are the World' raised \$120mn, roughly the value of an F30 frigate. Official food assistance from the US Government to Ethiopia totalled 300,000 tons, much less than half a stealth bomber. The total Ethiopian relief effort in 1984-85, the largest in history, was equivalent to one quarter of global *daily* expenditures for military purposes over the same period (Sivard, 1987). In 1988-89 the appalling starvation in southern Sudan and northern Somalia is all but ignored internationally.

Representing Starvation in Africa

We are bombarded with images of hunger and starvation, nowhere more so than for Africa. In its popular representations famine has emerged as the lodestar of African collapse and of the deep, enduring 'crisis' of the post-independence project. Images provide powerful representations of crisis but of a special sort. Photographs, for example, says things beyond the reach of words. This is a source of great power, but also of great ambiguity. Images of starving Tigrean mothers and children appear in the pages of the *New York Times* usually

jumbled together with glossy advertisements for sable jackets and the latest symbols of middle class consumer sovereignty. The contrast contained in such a juxtaposition is itself a sign of a certain sort of madness but, as John Berger (1980) has remarked, these overwhelming images of deprivation also have a dispelling quality. The photograph is weak in intention and meaning; it is ambiguous because it represents a single choice and a discontinuity; that is to say a photograph ruptures the continuity of (public) history or (private) life stories. Photographs supply information without a language of their own; they 'quote from appearance' (Berger). The photograph produces a truth which is only partly defensible (an event without context), but often through the use of words this ambiguity is often replaced by dogmatic assertion.

As famine photographs appear in the press, the event of starvation is ambiguous 'except to those whose personal relations to the event are such that their own lives supply the missing continuity' (Berger and Mohr, 1982:128). And most of us cannot, of course, provide the missing link; most of us do not even know hunger directly. But powerful images of famine frequently have a continuity provided for us; they have a dispelling effect, blaming everyone and no-one, they have no history. The discontinuity of the photograph is, in other words, healed by a sort of diffuse causality. The event depicted retains its enormous power because it documents a truth - the violation of a universal right, the right to food. And yet for reasons perhaps hinted at in the meanings attributed to images of the personal agony of famine victims in refugee camps, this right is systematically abrogated.

The power and ambiguity of famine images combined with the moral weight of the right to food opens food crises to explicitly political, if not propagandist, interpretations and meanings. In the context of the recent Cold War and the resurgence of the nationalities question in the USSR, the Ukrainian famine in the early 1930s has, to take one example, become a compelling illustration of this extreme politicisation. *Glasnost* has contributed to this dispute, reopening the debate over Stalinism, genocide and famine deaths. This ideological climate, the Ukraine in 1932, Ethiopia in the 1980s and China in 1958 can be employed to signal socialism as the very antithesis of equity and basic needs. Such a political reading provides sustenance to the right and its market triumphalism on the one hand, and to those who seek to reject what they see as a crude dependency theory ('capitalism causes famine') on the other.

It needs to be asserted that if famine can expose us to a certain idea of passivity, and if its ideological uses may bear odious political meanings, images of starvation in a free press have also mobilized state and international support for famine relief. Indeed, it is not easy to find an example of a famine in countries in which a free press, harnessing the power of famine images and the moral weight of the right to be free from hunger, is capable of mobilizing popular support and political opposition. But the way in which famine and the African 'malaise' have become inextricably linked in recent history speaks powerfully to the more general representations of the continent as mired in decay, anarchy, war and over-population.

Heart of Darkness: Proneness to Famine in Africa

In Africa, as Ayi Kwei Armah cryptically observes, death appears to be the only triumphant force. The sense of overwhelming doom is typically rooted in what is generally seen as a crisis in agriculture (low productivity, limited per capita growth in output), but also in a sort of African exceptionalism (Watts, 1990). The presumption is that across much of the third world, famine (understood as mortality due to mass starvation) has gradually disappeared, though hunger and malnutrition may of course remain and indeed may have worsened. India's 'success story' (the eradication of famine but the persistence of appalling poverty) stands in sharp contrast to the 'persistent drama of famine in Africa' (Dreze, 1988:102). African famine reflects, then, the colossal failure of agriculture and more generally the post-colonial project, confirming the continent's exceptionalism.

John Iliffe in his book, *The African Poor*, draws from the same intellectual lineage. Making a distinction between structural poverty - 'long term poverty of individuals due to their social or personal circumstances' and conjunctural poverty - 'the temporary poverty into which ordinarily self-sufficient people may be thrown by crisis' (1988:4), Iliffe suggest that Africa has experienced two major shifts in relation to poverty. The first, in keeping with the recent histories of Europe and Asia, is the transition from labour scarcity as a source of poverty in pre-colonial Africa to land scarcity (fed by the demographic boom from the 1930s) of the contemporary era. The second is the disappearance of famine (for Iliffe meaning 'mass' mortality) from the 1920s, but - and here is the exception - the terrifying 'return of conjunctural poverty in the form of mass famine mortality' after independence induced by drought and political conflict (1988:250). But aside from the problem of defining 'mass' mortality, the existence of major crises in some parts of Africa in the 1940s and 1950s and the fact that Iliffe's own view of famine causality is associated with drought, which was relatively insignificant in the small pluvial of the 1950-1965 period, there is a great danger of theoretically divorcing the structural from the conjunctural. Iliffe can, in this regard, suggest that as a cause of conjunctural poverty 'the international depression was trivial when compared with famine' (1988:156).

As a particular form of crisis, famines can be usefully situated with respect to current debates over crisis theory (Offe, 1984). The classical definition of crisis refers to the turning point of an illness in which the organism's self-healing powers are called into question. But Offe has suggested that this can generate at least two different crisis concepts: the first, which he calls a sporadic concept, represents a system endangered by acute catastrophic events similar to Iliffe's conception of famine. The second refers to a social system whose 'grammar' may be endangered but in which crisis is seen dynamically and processually as 'developmental tendencies that can be confronted with counter-acting tendencies which means that the outcome of the crisis is quite unpredictable' (Offe, 1984:37). For Offe the latter focuses on what he refers to as 'crisis proneness'. Structural tendencies and crisis proneness strike to the heart of a conjunctural

theory of famine, but move us beyond Iliffe's neo-Malthusian notion of structure as a population-resource equation (1988:4-7; 161-163).

In what respects can one talk of proneness to famine in Africa? The first is to refer to *poverty* or, perhaps more properly, *power and need*. This is not to suggest that famine cannot occur in the midst of plenty, but rather that large numbers of individuals who are materially poor face excessive food insecurities even during normal periods. Poverty is a diffuse structural explanation of famine, however, and analytically one must grasp how the power to command food, *that is to say the specific social structure of access to and control over resources* (see Endnote 1) is abrogated in concrete historical circumstances. This locates power in the market but also the political capacities of subaltern classes in relation to the state and other institutions. Nevertheless, the major relief agencies (the World Food Programme, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) show dramatically that in terms of national food consumption, food production, sources of food and income levels 27 African countries can be defined as 'at risk', that is to say vulnerable to famine (Curtis, Hubbard and Shepherd, 1988:13-27). Notwithstanding the fact that many of the statistics are probably fictional and so inaccurate as to be of dubious value, most of these states are particularly vulnerable to either drought, war, or both.

The second form of proneness resides in *the fiscal crisis of the state and its import capacity*. Curtis, Hubbard and Shepherd (1988:13) show that states suffering reduction in national income and import capacity are susceptible to famine both in terms of long-term famine prevention and in terms of relief. Reductions in employment, purchasing power, state expenditures on infrastructure, health, and ecological restoration, but particularly import capacity increase famine risk. The 1980s have been, in this regard, a nightmare for sub-Saharan Africa. GDP per capita declined by 20%, the terms of trade by 34%, and real minimum wages by 20% between 1980 and 1986 (Ghai and de Alcantara, 1989). Imports per capita declined by 65% over the same period. These trends are on average between two and three times worse than Latin America. In 1988 Africa's debt-service burden accounted for 60% of export earnings, paying to the IMF about one billion dollars more than they received. Some 23 states were relying on short-term capital (import credits in large part) either to sustain imports or prevent them falling in the 1980s. Austerity in the form of state reduction in health services, limited capacity to import food in crisis situations, growing income inequality and unemployment, and a compelling pressure to generate export revenues from the rural sector in tandem constitute the very antithesis of a famine-resistant economy.

Third, there is *civil war and geo-political conflict*. Without wishing to condone simplistic generalizations that civil wars across the continent can be explained by African political immaturity or 'tribalism', the reality is that the extent of war, war related deaths and destruction over the last two decades has been substantial (see Figure 1). In the last four years we have witnessed the hideous calamity of Sudanese and Eritrean/Tigrean refugees shuttling back and forth across the

Figure 1: War and war-related deaths

	Civil Only	Civil/ International	Religious/ Ethnic	UN Involved	Superpower Involved	Total Deaths
Angola		●	●	●	●	213,000 since 1975
Burundi	●		●			5,000+ in 1988
Chad		●		●	●	7,000 since 1980
Ethiopia-Eritrea		●	●		●	546,000 since 1974
Ethiopia-Other	●		●			500,000 since 1974
Morocco-W.Sahara		●	●	●	●	10,000 since 1975
Mozambique		●	●	●		400,000+ since 1981
Namibia		●	●	●		25,000 since 1970
South Africa	●		●	●		3,000 since 1985
Somalia	●					25,000 in 1988
Sudan	●		●			100,000+ since 1984
Uganda	●		●			102,000 since 1981

Source: *The Nation*, 9 January 1989:47; Sivard, 1987:31.

Sudan-Somali-Ethiopian borders fleeing military conflict. In the last year, large swaths of northwest Somalia have been depopulated by armed attacks from the Somali state while in Ethiopia it is estimated that nine million have been displaced (internally and externally) by war and famine over the last decade. War no more produces mass starvation as a necessity than does drought or entitlement change, but the physical displacement of large numbers of peasants, the destruction of communications and health infrastructure, and the dependency of a deracinated population on structures of relief made vulnerable by the fiscal crises of the state, vastly intensify proneness to famine among impoverished war victims. The scale and cost of displacement, and the important relations between domestic conflicts and external aggression, is most vivid in southern Africa. The monetary cost of destabilization between 1980 and 1986 is over \$30bn; six of the nine states are among the poorest 25 states in the world with average debt-service ratios of 120%. The brutal activities of Renamo in Mozambique have created conditions of the most appalling poverty: 400-600,000 have died in the war, two million have fled, and six million currently face food shortages. According to the UN one million in the region require food and health aid. In war situations there is always a transfer of food from civilian to fighting forces, from social to military budgets (the 1988 Ethiopian defence budget was 54% of gross income), and from the dominant to subaltern groups. In the case of the latter, war may through its inflationary effects erode the purchasing power of the poor, but in civil wars hunger can also be employed to weaken recalcitrant civilian or ethnic populations. In southern Sudan where some two million have been made homeless and 250,000 have died since 1984, the movement of food relief has been interrupted not only by the SPLA and the Sadiq government but most recently by the regime of General Beshir.

Finally there is proneness associated with the *partial commoditization of agrarian societies*. A distinctive aspect of sub-Saharan Africa is the continued dominance of peasant production and some form of self-provisioning. This is not to suggest a Rousseauian world of self-sufficiency as the notion of an uncaptured peasantry implies. By the early 1960s, for example, 56% of total calories in the cocoa belt in Nigeria were purchased, and a recent study by Pinstrup-Anderson (1985) shows how a 10% increase in food prices in rural northern Nigeria reduces the income of the rural poor by 9% and confirms earlier studies that 45% of monetary expenditures by peasants was spent on food. It is not simply that famine is embedded in the low levels of productivity or that famine has a structural relationship with peasant societies. Rather I want to suggest that in Africa there is a struggle between forces of retention (self-provisioning) and forces of extraction (commoditization) (Spitz, 1980:1), which has two sorts of implications for famine: first, that the manner in which the market develops (the how rather than the if) produces particular vulnerabilities. And second, that the partial commoditization of peasant life suggests that non-market functions performed by complex social and institutional arrangements, contracts, and inter-linked transactions shape famine proneness.

Telling Famine Stories: Theories, Tropes and Metaphors

Famine is, as David Arnold says (1988:5), a 'formative influence in our understanding of the modern world.' As an instance, widespread scarcity is naturally central to the discipline of economics. According to neo-classical competitive theory the notion of a structural failure of individuals to obtain what they want (employment, food) is anathema. Desai (1987:397) has observed that in a pure Walrasian general equilibrium theory, entitlements are secure in a trade-interdependent way such that the possibility of death due to insufficient entitlement claims is ruled out. An optimizing peasant in the face of an indeterminate harvest would make insurance arrangements. In the absence of trade barriers imposed by the state, private markets perform adequately, and hence W.O. Jones of the Stanford Food Research Institute can confidently claim that Nigeria only experienced famine once this century - during the civil war - 'which demonstrates that private marketing systems can be relied upon to feed the population' (1980:340). But what for many economists is an anomaly or aberration is the central problematic in famine studies (minimum subsistence is not met for large sections of society). The particular significance of Sen's (1981) analysis is precisely to question the economists' conventional story by posing economic relations and the market as socially and politically constituted. This may not appear terribly earth shattering to either marxists or to famine victims.

There are other stories to be told of course. Climate, 'over-population' and war, while potentially significant as proximate or trigger factors, have been substantially discredited as primary factors. Essentialist explanations of famine in which nature (broadly understood) or natural laws are invoked have, in other words, been socialized. This shift represents for some a significant theoretical

change and the growing hegemony of a new story, that of dependence, imperialism and radicalism. Bill Torry jumbles together an unusually heterogeneous literature that apparently argues that poverty causes famine, that capitalism causes poverty and that 'entire classes and nations lose control over their productive resources' (1986b:5). Dependency stories are, in this view, deterministic, privileging ultimate causes (and ignoring proximate or triggering events) and posing the African poor as hapless victims of a vampiric capitalism. Torry believes dependency to be a sort of 'Beast of the Apocalypse', a body of theory constituted by rigid, theological laws which are weak when it comes to explaining the complexity of particular events. In the pages of this journal, authors have been accused of romanticizing a pre-colonial past, refusing to accept the occurrence of pre-capitalist famines and building a rickety causal structure on, God forbid, unilinear modes of evolution and reified imperialism.

These stories tend to produce universalistic theories of famine causation or to relativize explanations by adding 'causes'. Many authors writing on Africa fame posit simple dualisms: internal versus external, state versus market, capitalism versus socialism, moral versus political economy factors', or a seamless web, a complex concatenation of factors, producing a generic famine. But the circumstances under which factors become causes are rather murky.

Is there a generic famine theory one should aspire to in analysing African food problems? Clearly there is a need for a comparative phenomenology of famine - that is to say comparative studies of the construction, understanding and experience of famine - but there is a danger, seen in the best of comparative studies, of assuming all cases of extreme food shortage to be members of the same class of event. In other words, a generic view of famine identifies these social crises as species of the same phenomenon having the same antecedent conditions. This freezes history in such a way that famines are removed from the evolving world history of which they are organically part. The danger, then, is that necessary and sufficient conditions for famine are collapsed; it is not clear what social processes make factors into causes. One has to harness (a) long-term structural processes, what I would call tendencies producing certain patterns of vulnerability; (b) the contingent or proximate events producing reductions in food supply and changes in entitlements, and (c) the locally specific social processes which give famines a particular rhythm, motion and timbre. A dominant aspect of the structural context for much of the modern period is provided by the development of capitalism linked to long-term entitlement change through market expansion, increasing divisions of labour and proletarianization, and the growth of centralized states which have both initiated and mediated entitlement changes. The uneven development of capitalism is such that it transplants itself onto foreign soil and combines with differing social and power structures to produce different configurations of class and entitlement so that famines assume distinctive national characters.

Famines are above all about the exercise, and lack of, power and rights - specifically the power to command food through a variety of market and non-market institutional means. Sen (1981) has shown how a theory of entitlement

necessarily raises questions of politics and differential power. But to the extent that it is the poor who are at risk and are famine victims, the study of food crises provides an opportunity to grasp the ways in which subaltern groups are both subordinate to, and capable of, resisting dominant relations of power. Famines constitute one moment in the struggle for food, and any theory of mass starvation must come to terms with the political, social and juridical contexts of the economy and what Sen (1987:64) calls 'the entire system of property rights or the totality of rights.' Understanding famine demands, but rarely makes use of, a comprehensive theory of power and politics.

The Internal Architecture of African Famine

Peter Cutler (1985:12) suggests that 'famine is an abnormal event, characterized by a *breakdown* in social relationships giving rise to *epidemic starvation and excess mortality*' (emphasis mine). This particular famine lexicon must, of course, be employed with great care. Famine is a process not an event; it can be about abnormality and collapse, but it also implies extension and intensification, it is defined by disease and mass death, which is terminal and biological. Famine cannot be defined, as Alex de Waal (1989) shows, by mass starvation alone. These polarities and the language of famine are not narrowly semantic because they contain assumptions about human agency, the role of the collective, and the recursive qualities of subsistence crises.

Sen's theory of entitlement change rests on a quite sharp distinction between poverty and famine; the latter appears as episodic (rather than recursive) and is a biological episode or aberration rather than a process. Further, Sen's model of famine mortality - destitution leads to starvation leads to death - posits a linear and relatively unproblematic sequence from food scarcity to biological death from starvation. But it is clear that even in biological terms the adaptive capability of the body generates stages (and a complexing 'plateauing') of physiological deterioration. De Waal (1989) has shown that a food crisis may lead to destitution, but it is a crisis of health, increasing exposure and/or susceptibility to fatal diseases which tends to produce famine mortalities. Famines can, and often are, long and drawn out interactive social and biological processes accompanied by transformations in the mental and emotional states of victims and of social networks in which they are embedded.

In what sense, then, is famine a process? Rangasami (1985:1749) has offered a tripartite model in which 'forces' of deepening intensity deprive individuals of assets and endowments: the onset he refers to as 'dearth' (in essence high prices), the second phase as 'famishment' (the process of being starved), and finally 'morbidity'. The great strength of this vision is that it privileges action and agency. Famines at some point may fell the subaltern classes, but not before the rural (and sometime urban) world is turned into a scene of frenzied activity. The recognition that individuals struggle for food is not exactly original, having been noted over a 100 years ago in the Indian Famine Codes, which documented the premonitory signs of famine. In the last decade our understanding of what

is variously referred to as coping mechanisms, household or survival strategies, and adaptive responses has expanded considerably, particularly in relation to African famines. One can now usefully compare, for example, a village study in Sierra Leone with another in northern Nigeria (Richards, 1986; Watts, 1983). In spite of striking differences in ecology, climate and population density, each case asserts the centrality of both anticipatory and counter-acting crisis tendencies. In each community the on-farm flexibility of local agronomy, the innovative deployment of household labour, and a graduated sequence of asset liquidation and money raising associated with seasonal price rises in local grain markets is plainly evident. In the Mende community, however, limited land pressures and partial commoditization in conjunction with a robust moral economy rooted in intense political competition among local patrons work to the advantage of the rural poor. Amongst the Hausa a vibrant mercantile system driving complex inter-linked commodity markets (grain, labour and money) and marked endowment differences work to reproduce structural vulnerability, but not necessarily dispossession, among some peasants.

Across the divide of local and regional variability, however, one can construct a sort of behavioural bridge; the famine survival strategies conform, in other words, to a rough and ready pattern recognizing, of course, that the rhythms and speed at onset of shortage may vary dramatically. Famines, like peasant rebellions or revolutions, are particular couplings of structures of power and human agency and are rarely exactly alike. On the basis of four detailed accounts, Corbett (1988) posits a three stage model of 'household coping strategies'. The first stage, *insurance mechanisms*, embraces cropping strategies, wild food collection, sale of possessions such as jewelry, local employment opportunities and interhousehold loans. In relation to past famines people often find new ways to survive, characteristically via the market which provides new opportunities, but they are in new, even more precarious positions. The second stage, *disposal of productive assets*, entails the liquidation of livestock, tools and land, consumption reductions and credit from moneylenders. Stage three is *destitution, distress migration and death*.

A recognition that households may pass along a sort of response gradient has stimulated considerable discussion on the use of socio-economic indicators for famine early warning systems, and most especially to sustain individuals sliding down the slippery slope to destitution and refugee status. It is axiomatic, of course, that the extent to which the market forces shape specific responses and the flexibility and freedom of choice exercised by families and individuals varies geographically, by class and by gender. Coping strategies are also historical phenomena constantly shaped and eroded by local struggles and state policies and grounded in a food system often in the throes of transformation. In the rough and tumble of actual famines, the identification of a broad social and temporal logic lays the foundation, at least, for strategic intervention.

The ways in which societies reproduce themselves in the course of the famine process seem reasonably clear, but there are several important caveats. First, the

sequencing is ordered in such a way that the responses can be graduated with respect to time, reversibility and commitment of domestic resources. This structure of responses implies that famine functions as a force in proletarianization in a way that is more or less irreversible, a sort of ratchet effect. Second, the responding unit is ordinarily presumed to be the household defined in a solidary Chayanovian sense. But households have their own architecture and are sites of competing interests and struggles; gender and generational struggles may be exacerbated in times of crisis. The household may gradually fracture, and this suggests a decomposition of what are putatively taken to be domestic entitlements (the household welfare function). In the Fula communities in eastern Gambia, farmers refer specifically to the period during extreme hungry seasons when 'individuals have to look after themselves'. Third, famine response is victim-centric. It needs to be reiterated that households respond differentially and that famines involve accumulation as well as liquidation. The discourse of famines solely in terms of the victim (and of starvation rather than disease), however morally necessary, nonetheless constitutes only one part of the story. Finally, coping - popularly conveying passivity or the imagery of individuated scavenging - is irreducibly collective and political, and not in the prosaic sense of occasional food theft or riots. In my opinion the sequence of responses represents struggles over the command of food; entitlements may be defended, fought over (however unsuccessfully), won and lost. Famine victims are, after all, victimized, a process encompassing the moral and political weight of peasant solidarity, moral indignation, collective and subaltern power. The image of destitution and powerless supplicants represents a terminal point and, as Arnold (1988:74) notes, 'depoliticizes and dehumanizes [famine sufferers] by reducing their behavior to the unthinking reflexes of Pavlov's salivating dogs.'

If there is a growing consensus on the architecture of responses to famine, there is a fractious debate over the purported abnormality of famine conditions. The 'breakdown' view emphasizes social collapse (at some point) to the point of pathology. Cutler (1985), for example, paints a gory canvas of the 1984 Ethiopian famine: slavery, child abandonment, prostitution, murder and even cannibalism all mark the dissolution of civility. Rahmato (1988:292) rejects such pathologies as 'nonsense', positing that famines, and the recursive quality of subsistence crises in everyday life, reaffirm what he calls the 'traditional values of survival . . . diligence, frugality, co-operation' (1988:153). This is what I call the 'elastic theory' of famine. A processual view of famine naturally implies that famines intensify and deepen what may be 'normal exploitation' (Scott, 1985), but Torry pushes this insight to a dubious extreme. In his view (1986a:150) 'researchers have misunderstood peasant adjustments to famines' because (a) high risk constituencies acquiesce to harms imposed upon them as part of the moral order, (b) the recovery process is not as socially traumatic as westerners suppose, and (c) individuals excuse or tolerate life endangering actions performed against them as 'leading to a healing of . . . psychic wounds' (1986a:152). There is an important truth in both positions, nevertheless, which can be resolved by returning to the notion of process. Famine as a social and biological

process is rooted in the 'normal' - crises heighten social realities and rarely negate them, as Arnold (1984:64) observes - yet at its zenith it is of exceptional potency and destructive power.

Entitlements: Endowment Mapping in History

[The] phase of economic development after the emergence of a large class of wage labourers but before the development of social security arrangements is potentially a deeply vulnerable one (Amartya Sen, 1981:146).

Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* (1981) has done more than any other single publication to prompt debate and discussion on theories of famine causation. Reflecting perhaps his formative intellectual influences (Maurice Dobb and Kenneth Arrow), Sen's economics begins unconventionally with entitlements, the rules governing the acquisition, use, and transfer of property rights, and with what in orthodox neo-classical theory is taken to be trivial or logically incomplete (i.e. explanations of mass starvation). An entitlement system is related to an individual's command over food in two senses. First, it heavily shapes the initial endowment through inheritance; and second it frames the transformation of endowments into goods through production, trade, employment - what Sen calls exchange entitlement (E) mapping. E-mapping and initial endowment (his/her ownership bundle) determines an individual's exchange entitlement. Famines develop when these entitlements collapse for large segments of society, which implies that starvation can occur without there being a shortage of food. The great Bengal famine of 1943 is, according to Sen, a case of entitlement change without food availability decline (FAD) with dire consequences for some three million victims due to (a) a requisition-induced inflationary spiral and (b) limited markets for what some rural non-food producers had to sell. Sen's theory does not imply that food imports are irrelevant for famine relief; rather that they are necessary and not sufficient, whereas food availability decline is neither necessary nor sufficient to precipitate a famine.

It has been suggested, with good reason, that Sen's entitlement theory is the formalization of a very old idea. The famine debates in India discussed 'famines of work' in the 1860s and the Famine Commission Report of 1880 is a superb example of entitlements and class analysis. With some deserved hostility, Ashok Mitra noted that 'our great-grandmothers who ... were altogether innocent of the notion of "non-negative orthant of n-dimensional real space" knew about these common factors underlying famines' (1982:78). Nonetheless, entitlement approaches have the formidable merit of focusing on the specific social, political and institutional relations between people and food and why some groups are affected and others hardly touched. Megan Vaughan (1987) has employed this approach with extraordinary power in her discussion of the 1949 Nyasaland famine. She vividly documents the differing fortunes of tenants on the estates, brick makers, millers and freeholding peasants, but most particularly she documents the entitlement changes among women (something largely neglected by Sen) who are invisible in the historical record. Some women were more vulnerable than others, a function of their relative depend-

ence on food (and beer) production, on wages, and on the status of their husbands (salaried officials versus migrant labourers). Gender subordination, embedded in the social relation of society prior to the famine, explains why women were neglected, abandoned, divorced and sold into prostitution in the interests of male survival.

The gender basis of entitlement raises the more general issue of intra-household food access and distribution. Sen (1987:63) sees this as a non-ownership problem since 'food owned by the family is shared', but a good deal of the work on African households would suggest otherwise. In any event, age and gender bias has been shown to be central to discussions of nutrition and health, and it is of equal significance for an understanding of domestic entitlements, the vulnerabilities of the young and old, and for questions of maternal detachment. All this said, the Indian studies and the Sudanese data for 1984-1985 (de Waal 1989) suggest that male mortality due to starvation and disease was higher than that of women during the 19th century famines, which suggests that women's 'coping' contested their victim status.

Sen is on somewhat shakier ground when he turns to history. In his book, entitlements provide what one might call a conjunctural explanation. It focuses on the immediate relationship between food and certain sorts of people. Sen's history describes proximate trigger effects, such as state requisition, which perturb entitlements and less on the processes producing a crisis of social reproduction, the historical political economy by which certain sorts of entitlements come to be socially distributed (see Endnote 2). In this sense it is questionable what sort of causality Sen has identified insofar as, for example, his account of Bangladesh is singularly lacking in sensitivity to the decline and social transformation of the Bangladeshi food sector. Of course Sen himself notes that entitlements are mediated by legal and property relations, which demand a detailed examination of the socio-economic structure of society and of what he tantalisingly refers to in passing as 'modes of production' and the 'totality of rights'. History of a different sort - namely the sources of social power - is required to understand not simply the occurrence of famine but its recurrence.

If famine is the socially differentiated lack of command over food, it is naturally about power, politics and rights broadly understood, all of which are embedded in a multiplicity of arenas from the domestic (patriarchal politics) to the national/state (how ruling classes and subaltern groups acquire and defend certain rights). In social systems dominated by capitalism, ownership through private property determines exchange entitlements, which is to say that class and class struggle help shape the genesis and the outcome of the property-hunger equation. At the same time capitalism has developed unevenly on a world scale with the result that there are national capitalisms (coloured by differing configurations of class and international geo-politics) which provide the building blocks for distinguishing different species, and consequences, of famines. Actually existing socialism have class and other interests, too, and perhaps other property rights consequent on political action and 'socialistic'

regimes of accumulation. The same can be said for pre-capitalisms for which the moral economy of the poor may be constitutive of some important entitlement claims. In all such cases, however, one needs to know how enforceable and legitimate are the legal and property relations which mediate entitlements and to recognize that all such rights are negotiated and fought over. Such struggles are not peripheral to famine but strike at its core. And it is perhaps quite apposite that Sen (1987) himself in his recent work has turned to the question of the politics of the 'right not to be hungry'.

Famine and the (Anti) Market Mentality

The influence of Sen's analysis has irrevocably shifted the terms of the debate from shortage of food supply to the intervening variables between food production and consumption. The market has, as a consequence, become a centre-piece of contemporary famine analysis. Seaman and Holt (1980:296) argue, for example, that 'a shift from a 'communal' to a 'market' economy does in general . . . mark a shift toward greater vulnerability to and severity of famine.' They themselves note that this is a crude division, but the market-centric view is now deeply etched in famine discourse. It is certainly seen in some strains of the moral economy story in which commercialisation unproblematically erodes *tout court* a putative subsistence ethic. As a counterweight, the anti-market mentality is matched by a glorification of the market, the so-called structure-conduct-performance approach by which African markets are efficient, responsive and self-financing.

The issue here is not to dismiss or extol the market but to reassess the very notion of the market itself, and specifically to see markets as social and material institutions (Bush, 1988; Swift, 1989). Markets are conventionally rendered as systems of freely negotiated chosen contracts (bargaining), an auction in which buyers and sellers bid against one another or a broker-organized market. All of these images are of limited substance. As Elson (1988:10) says, a market is a nexus between buyers and sellers but '*this nexus has to be made . . . a market implies one or more agents who act as market makers, setting prices, providing information . . . bringing buyers and sellers together*' (emphasis mine). This is neither the invisible hand of Adam Smith's market or the bureaucratic 'market' of Alfred Chandler's visible hand. How markets develop and how they are 'socialized' - the nature of the market antagonisms as Marx put it - become extremely relevant. In the case of the third world, in which commoditization is incomplete and intersection of markets with other institutions is integral to agrarian structure, the making of markets presages exchange-mapping and hence famine dynamics.

This 'alternative' market focus on famines has generated some excellent studies on food systems and the social relations of exchange in Africa. These market ethnographies reflect less an anti-market mentality than a sensitivity to the social development of the market and in particular the politics of exchange and the interlinkages of commodity markets. Clough (1985), Bush (1988) and Saul

(1987) document complex crop advance systems organized by local merchants, the tying of markets in money, grain and labour, and a segmented grains trade in which speculative activity and market collusion by large wholesalers reproduces local patterns of vulnerability for rural poor. Saul's Burkina research documents restricted competition at local and national levels and an extreme concentration of inter-seasonal grain storage. Clough identifies distinctive rhythms of seasonal grain acquisition and disposal by class: poor peasants are compelled to sell early and take interest bearing loans later in the season, a pattern of distress sales and purchase intensified during famines.

The question of the social relations of trade and production strikes to the heart of contemporary famine vulnerability within the pastoral sector in drought-prone ecosystems (Sutter, 1987; Bonfiglioli, 1988; White, 1986). Seasonal stresses are frequently exacerbated by volatile terms of trade and growing inter-household inequality. In Sahelian systems it is well documented that animal-grain terms of trade are central to any understanding of the pastoral sector and that serious droughts, which effect both cereal harvests and milk production via range quality, greatly enhance off-take rates. Increased animal sales (usually small ruminants in phase I) combined with higher animal mortality rates can be associated with market slumps and price collapses. Herders are forced into distress sales of younger males and eventually reproductive stock. As markets are flooded, herder's purchasing power collapses and herds are rapidly depleted (phase II). In famine conditions these processes may be synergistic with devastating consequences. Herd reconstitution, due to high animal prices in the aftermath of large-scale herd liquidation and mortalities (phase III), may be problematic if not altogether impossible.

Processes of herd viability and vulnerability are shaped by new patterns of stock alienation and social stratification in the 1980s, themselves a product, in part, of previous famine conditions. Households owning smaller herds and strapped by inadequate milk production depend on non-livestock income sources, increasingly evanescent secondary sources (such as gathering and labouring), and commercialisation strategies characterized by heavy culling of males and forced sales of cows and heifers. During a severe drought and/or high grain prices, poor herders massively decapitalize and experience gradual 'proletarianization'. Decapitalization among the poor may be matched by heavy buying and accumulation on the part of wealthy herders and entrepreneurs. Large diversified herds appear at the same time that absentee ownerships and new forms of animal contracting and debt-traps signal new relations of production in the pastoral economy. Wealthy herders make use of the services of effectively propertyless herders, profit from the fruits of a lucrative cattle trade, and may be able to consolidate their power through privatizations of rangeland and wells. Changing patterns of ownership and production relations account for the particular exposure of some herding families and the differential capacities for herd reconstitution.

Peace, Democratization and the Rights of the Hungry

Claims of right or entitlement . . . carry only as much weight as the legitimacy of the institution will bear (Thomas Nagel, 1977:57).

In comparing the current African crisis to conditions in an increasingly heterogeneous third world, several authors have drawn a sharp distinction between India and sub-Saharan Africa (Dreze and Sen, 1990). In spite of the almost pharaonic sequence of famines throughout Indian history, the period from the termination of the Second World War has been, despite the existence of conditions which might trigger major food crises, famine free. Since 1947 the government of India, working with the legacy of the 'Famine Codes' of the late 19th century, have enacted laws and instituted a famine relief system intended to bolster and protect food entitlements among the popular classes. The 'Famine Codes' (systematized in the 1970s as 'Scarcity Manuals') contained an early warning and a food distribution system, but its cornerstone was a panoply of public works (income transfers to enhance purchasing power) and a massive long-term buffer stock of grain, currently standing at 23 million tonnes (equal to all maize and millet production in sub-Saharan Africa!). The imperial famine prevention system has been reinforced by state interventions in agrarian structure (asset protection, labour and wage legislation), infrastructure and a decentralized relief administration system. Of course it needs to be added that if India has averted food crises, it has done little to remedy chronic malnutrition: nearly half the world's malnutrition is said to be in that one country. Further, one should not exaggerate the extent to which women's subordination, the protection of assets, urban bias, or corruption in food relief have been systematically eradicated. Yet famine aversion - particularly in comparison to its resurgence in Africa since 1970 - is no mean achievement.

Jean Dreze (1988), in his assessment of famine relief in India, has highlighted the contribution of a long bureaucratic tradition, an effective local administration, and the importance of contingency planning, experimentation, and learning. But what is central to the genesis of famine prevention - and entitlement protection - is of course politics. This is not simply a case of appreciating that relief is a form of 'investment' as Dreze puts it; neither is it entirely a reflection of moral rights and obligations. Sen (1987) is a little closer to the mark when he observes that a free press has both helped produce, legitimate and maintain the relief system. Food entitlements - themselves expressions of power - emerge precisely from political claims, obligations reflecting a commitment or compulsion to sustain vulnerable classes. Obligations to protect entitlements and to keep the hungry alive, if they are to be more than rhetorical or manifesto rights allocative justice; that is to say they are political achievements. Political representation and struggle are not, in other words, marginal to discussions of famine prevention.

It is in this regard that the problem of democracy and peace strike to the heart of Africa's 'famine problem'. There are macroeconomic, bureaucratic and infrastructural contrasts between Africa and South Asia but the heart of the

matter is the political exclusion of peasants and the urban poor, and the fact that 'control of political power . . . is a [subject] of armed conflicts in which food is a weapon of war' (Harriss, 1988:169). Access to the state is a precondition for membership in the African bourgeoisie with the state exploiting peasants through extra-economic coercion. In this context, democratization must remove the strait-jacket which stifles the peasantry, because any popular movement to transform political life must sever the hold that ruling classes exercise over rural producers. The two strategies against hunger noted by Dreze and Sen (1990) - support led security, and growth mediated security - are both conspicuously absent in Africa. The African model seems to have been commodification with growth or security and it is the politics of this condition, framing the distributions of entitlements, rights and capabilities, which is fundamental to understanding the subsistence calamities of the last two decades.

The need for what Curtis, Hubbard and Shepherd (1988:196) call social entitlements (the control of assets as a basis for famine prevention) is deeply embedded in the politics of democratization. In this sense, the right to not be hungry and the emergence and consolidation of civil society in Africa are inextricably linked. All of this should not paper over the important success stories in African famine relief; indeed, local administration and public works programmes have seemed to work best under crisis conditions. In fact the oft-cited Botswana famine prevention programme (replacement of lost income and asset protection) can in part be grounded in competitive politics and local democratic representation that was responsive to local needs. But the likelihood of entitlement protection for the millions of rural poor in Africa, equitable access to arable and pasture land, the provision of legal status to women as major food producers, institutional mechanisms for the regulation of public goods, and the serious commitment to public works and market regulation, cannot be divorced from 'the creativity of popular activity' (Mamdani, 1986:49). In the long term, famine prevention in Africa will be rooted in the doubtless long and contradictory struggle for democracy.

Michael Watts is Professor of Geography and Development Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Endnotes

1: This is what I take Sen to refer to when he talks of the 'totality of rights' a person commands (1983:497); 2: Sen employs entitlements in a variety of ways. It is most limiting when he refers only to legal rights, and I believe most useful when it is expanded to include the totality of social, moral and institutional rights and powers. The latter seems to be what he and Dreze (1990) call 'capability' and 'well-being freedom'.

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