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# The end of famine? Prospects for the elimination of mass starvation by political action

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## ABSTRACT

After a long-term decline in the frequency and lethality of famines, 2017 has witnessed resurgent international concern over the issue. This paper examines the trends in famine over the last 150 years, with particular attention to the fusion of famine with forcible mass starvation. It identifies four main historic periods of famines, namely: the zenith of European colonialism; the extended World War; post-colonial totalitarianism; and post-Cold War humanitarian emergencies; and asks whether we may be entering a fifth period in which famines return in new guises. The paper explores structural causes of famine vulnerability, the overlapping but distinct causes of food crises and excess mortality in those crises, and the proximate triggers of famine. While noting that almost all famines have multiple causes, with no individual factor either necessary or sufficient, the paper focuses on the growing significance of political decision and military tactics in creating famine.

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## 1. Introduction

Famine returned to the news headlines in 2017. It was a disagreeable re-entry after twenty years in which mass starvation had been fading as a matter of concern to all but historians. On 10 March, Stephen O'Brien, head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told the UN Security Council that, 'We stand at a critical point in history. Already at the beginning of the year we are facing the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations.' (O'Brien, 2017) O'Brien's claim was at once hyperbolic and carefully scripted. As this paper demonstrates, the 2017 crises are by no means the worst for seventy years, and by all sensible metrics we are at a historic low in terms of the scale and lethality of famines. But O'Brien was sending a well-crafted political message, at a time when humanitarian principles and budgets were under threat. He was correct that 2017 potentially represents a critical point in contemporary history, at which a long-term historic decline in mass starvation, which can be dated to the end of World War Two, has stalled and may be in the process of being reversed.

O'Brien's statement came in the wake of a declaration by the UN

of 'famine' in South Sudan, probable famine in northern Nigeria, and imminent famines in Yemen and Somalia. The famine declaration was based on an assessment of the data on nutrition, child mortality and food security collected by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system (IPC) by UN agencies and their partners (FEWSNET, 2017). Without doubt, there are gaps and shortcomings in the information on which the assessment was based, but the data are the best we have, and certainly better than those available at any time in history.

O'Brien made three calls to action, each of them appropriate to the real causes of the famines. First, he called for quick action 'to tackle the precipitating factors of famine. Preserving and restoring normal access to food and ensuring all parties' compliance with international humanitarian law.' Second, he called for the belligerent parties in each country to facilitate access by humanitarian actors. Third, he emphasized that famine would end, or be prevented, by stopping the fighting.

The broader significance of O'Brien's statement and the UN famine declarations is that one of the great unacknowledged successes of the last century, the near-definitive conquest of famine, is on the point of unraveling before our eyes. The facts that famines are man-made and that they may be becoming common after a generation in which they were almost entirely absent, are linked.

Are we seeing a return of famine? In 2015, I was commissioned to write a chapter on war and famine for the *Global Hunger Index*, published by a consortium of organizations including the

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International Food Policy Research Institute, Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe (GHI 2015). At that time I was able to write with some confidence that we were on track to eliminate famine. In 2016, when I was asked to propose a topic for a plenary presentation to the American Association of Geographers, I submitted an abstract in which I suggested that progress had stalled. Today I must admit that progress has been reversed.

Over the last two decades, political scientists and historians have come to appreciate much more profoundly than before, the deep connections between the politics of persecution, dictatorship, conquest and genocide, and the occurrence of mass starvation. Indeed, starvation is transitive: it is something that people do to one another (de Waal, 1997).

### 1.1. Explaining famines

Every famine has multiple causes, both structural factors that determine vulnerability and the proximate triggers of the crisis. Moreover, famines are shape-shifters, taking on different guises for each generation. A rigorous definition of famine, consistent across all places and historical periods, would be remarkably difficult to generate and apply. One reason is that today's levels of mortality and nutrition are so much higher than those prevailing in previous centuries. Cormac Ó Gráda makes the point that nutritional and mortality levels that were commonplace in Europe two centuries ago—for example consumption of under 2100 calories per day for one fifth of the population and child mortality rates of two per 10,000 per day—meet the current Integrated IPC threshold for a humanitarian emergency (Ó Gráda 2015, pp. 174–5). Another is that the politics of food and livelihoods have changed dramatically, so that different kinds of actions perpetrate or protect against famines. With these circumstantial changes, intellectual frameworks have shifted too. Amartya Sen observes that most definitions of famine are 'more interesting in providing a pithy description of what happens in situations clearly diagnosed as one of famine than in helping us to do the diagnosis' (Sen, 1981, p. 40 footnote). Nonetheless, we can identify the key elements of a working definition of famine: a crisis of mass hunger that causes elevated mortality over a specific period of time.

Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux provide us with important intellectual scaffolding for refining this (Howe & Devereux, 2004). They distinguish between the *magnitude* of famine and its *severity*. Magnitude is best defined as the numbers who die. Howe and Devereux created a simple logarithmic scale for the scale of famines, and in this paper I use their categories of 'great' and 'calamitous' famines—that kill 100,000 people or more and one million people or more respectively—as my main point of reference. The IPC scale uses severity, in large part because it is simpler to measure in real time, and also because an overall assessment of famine deaths is of little use when a famine is impending. All of these measures presuppose a 'normal' level of nutrition, mortality and livelihoods, against which deviations can be measured. The IPC scale functions as a heuristic and diagnostic tool, rather than a universally valid metric.

Insofar as its definition requires excess mortality, famine is defined by its outcome. Could there be a famine in which no-one died—for example because of an expeditious and effective relief effort? It's an interesting thought experiment. Compare the definition of an epidemic, which requires a certain level of disease transmission, but applies regardless of human fatalities—it needs illness but not deaths. Compare the definition of genocide, which is a crime defined by the intent of the perpetrators, regardless of whether or not they manage to kill large numbers of people. The commonsense definition of 'famine' bears the imprint of the foundational texts of demographic theory, and in particular Thomas

Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which saw famine as the product of natural laws of population growth and (of special concern) population collapse (Malthus, 1926). An alternative and apparently commonsense definition of famine as food shortage is both empirically incorrect (Sen, 1981) and also carries a Malthusian intellectual lineage—what I have called 'alimentary economics', the simplistic notion that the dominant factor in human ecology is food production and consumption (de Waal, 2017).

A mortality-based definition implicitly includes instances of forced mass starvation, such as the starving to death of over 2 million prisoners of war by the German army during World War Two, but such cases are rarely included in catalogues of historic famines. This is an oversight that I seek to remedy: famines have much in common with mass atrocities, and these shared elements are brought more clearly into focus if we include starvation crimes (de Waal, 1997; 2017). For the purposes of this paper, I will hold to a definition of famine that is based upon excess deaths associated with hunger, but with a cautionary note that this may be a historically-specific definition that may no longer be appropriate in a twenty-first century political economy.

In distinguishing between structural and proximate causes of famine, and placing these in a historic context, let me call upon the image used by the historian Richard Tawney to describe the plight of the peasant in history, as a man standing up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple threatens to drown him (Tawney, 1964). The height of the water represents the structural factor, the nature of the ripple is the proximate one.

One part of the story of famine over history is the rise and receding of the water level. In particular, the last seventy years has seen the most sustained drop in the water in recorded history. Vast populations that were chronically at the point of starvation, have achieved far greater food security than at any time before. When the water was high the most important questions to ask concerned why this was the case.

The second part of the story is the height of the waves. As the waters recede, our peasant may still be drowned, but it will take a bigger rush of water for this to occur. We need therefore to ask, how large are the waves, and what causes them. As the structural causes have changed and become less salient, the proximate causes of exceptional events have taken on greater significance.

The metaphor of the man standing in water is useful but can also mislead. First, some of the causes of the high water level are also the same factors that cause lethal waves—for example colonial conquest and exploitation are short term shocks and long-term structural violence. Second, it doesn't capture inequality: individuals within a population can face very different levels of risk. And third, the 'drowning' metaphor fails to capture the different outcomes of a catastrophic collapse in people's ability to obtain sufficient food. Notably, with improved public health, the killer epidemics that historically accompanied famines, have lessened. There are life-saving technologies for the drowning man.

### 1.2. Examining famines in the modern era

To examine famines in the modern era, the World Peace Foundation established a dataset of all famines in the world since 1870 that killed 100,000 or more people, according to the lowest credible estimate (World Peace Foundation, 2017). We began in 1870 because the data for earlier famines are very problematic. We excluded episodes that killed fewer than 100,000 people, chiefly because of insuperable evidentiary problems, especially in the earlier time period. We included episodes of forced mass starvation, such as the mass killing of Soviet prisoners of war by the German army in 1941–42. There are a total of 61 episodes on the list. Fig. 1 represents the numbers of episodes of famine and forced mass

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