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Famine in European History

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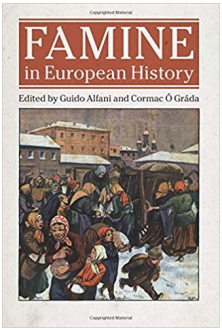

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Famines, one of the most “terrible but also the most fascinating of European history’s themes” (p. 24) were one of the main challenges facing early modern societies. Every state - as Reverend Thomas Malthus highlighted - had to take account of these and millions and millions of people suffered in the struggle to keep food availability in line with demographic trends. Certainly a single bad harvest did not alone trigger famine but a shortage of food was a recurrent and relatively common phenomenon of which the people were well aware, whatever their social class.

Despite this cruel state of affairs, however, the economic and social historians of pre-industrial (and industrial) Europe have taken relatively little interest in famine from a comparative perspective, preferring small-scale enquiries with relatively few margins of comparison. This well organized volume responds to this shortfall. It is book aiming to offer a Europe-wide panorama on the strength of the work of dozens of researchers from various regional areas comprising nine chapters per zone (aggregating diverse past and present state entities) in addition to a packed introduction that presents the book’s approach, methods, and the main characteristics of the famines. The book’s long-term perspective (from the Middle Ages until the plagues ended) necessarily varies from chapter to chapter: while for Italy and England the analysis starts in the mid-thirteen century, for France, Spain and the Low Countries the starting point is the fourteenth century while for other regions the beginning of the story is necessarily later. The analysis concludes in the nineteenth century, although Chapter 10 (Russia and Ukraine) examines certain twentieth century-famines in addition to a final chapter on the complex interwar period. The overall objectives are twofold, both clear and ambitious: building a chronology of the main famines and analyzing their causes and consequences. And all this from a comparative perspective at all times via a shared approach and methodology which invites cross-comparison between the various chapters.

The chapters' starting point is an agreement on a definition of famine to distinguish it, as Adam Smith did, from simple poverty or shortage of food. For this Scottish Enlightenment scholar the former were the outcome of the inability of rulers to respond to the latter. Thus the book's authors focus on severe food shortage (i.e. famine) by adopting Cormac Ó Gráda's definition in which "Famine refers to a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases" (p. 2).

As far as the causes of famine are concerned, in this case the authors take up the debate and dualism associated with the two great eighteenth century-thinkers referred to above. Whilst Malthus saw famines as essentially triggered by demographic growth disproportionate to the ability to produce food, Smith attributed famines to human error. In some ways this latter theory has recently been taken up by economist A. Sen who looks less to famine itself and more to individual entitlement and rights to food at times of shortage. In other words famine is more the result of an inefficient - or unequal - distribution of food rather than production or availability deficits. Aware of the potential ideological traps inherent in these two approaches, the authors of the individual chapters (to varying extents) see no conflict between demographic-economic and more political-institutional (or human) causes but think in terms of complementarity with famines equally the result of human action and natural causes. This is due to the fact that famine's characteristics vary from era to era and context to context. Thus, whilst regional reconstructions in the various chapters show that production shortfalls were the main cause of pre-industrial famines, distribution played an important part not only in wheat market functioning but also in the role the public institutions played in food availability for the various components of a given society. Consequently, as the book's editors have highlighted, famine's causes were never *purely* natural with the human and institutional (private and public) hand always to some extent at work, playing a central role in limiting or triggering catastrophe.

All the chapters share a methodology to guarantee maximum comparability between the various case studies. In addition to the Ó Gráda definition cited above, two indicators are used to distinguish famine from straightforward food shortages: increases in the death rate and trends in the price of wheat and other foods. As far as the first of these indicators is concerned, it is a key element in any reconstruction of famine time frames and severity. Price sequences, whilst widely used in other studies, have the twofold advantage of being available for periods preceding death records (normally available from the mid-sixteenth century at the earliest) and involving unit analyses going beyond single communities or parishes.

Despite source limitations for certain regional areas, the book is able to offer a firm chronology of European famines. In the first place, as far as plague incidence and intensity is concerned, it is undeniable that a cluster of extremely severe famines occurred in the half century preceding the Black Plague (1347-1351) with the most severe being the 1315-1317 famine which struck the whole of central-northern Europe as well as in the 16th century (from 1590-1598 onwards). The century which culminated in the 1693-1697 famines was one of the greatest crises in European history and it was clearly at this juncture that food availability became a serious problem for rulers to face up to. The 1590s were also a key turning point in trade route terms, facilitating - as some specialist in trade history had already highlighted - the arrival of Northern Europeans in the Mediterranean with wheat exports from the Baltic, replacing Black Sea wheat supplies complicated by difficult relations with the Ottoman Empire. The eighteenth century was a different matter, however, with food crises after the severe 1708-1711 famine seeming smaller scale than the past. This was a period in which the north's relative advantage seems to have vanished, with the balance being overturned and central-northern regions experiencing worse shortages than central-southern Europe, with the exception of England.

The panorama of famine's causes and consequences is certainly complex and the historian's work is certainly fascinating, while it is frustrating for social scientists seeking to build a single model to encompass this complex series of factors. As we saw above, many elements contributed to famines, both natural and human. Regarding the natural causes, it is clear that all these periods were characterised by high demographic density and pressure on resources (land in particular) while recurrent adverse weather conditions (first and foremost rainy springs) had negative effects on the availability of the grain required for human consumption. These factors were linked to medium-long term climatic conditions (inversions of the cold to hot cycle and viceversa), extraordinary atmospheric events (such as volcanic eruptions) or epidemic outbreaks. Human action is, on the other hand, evident where institutional factors are concerned, both public and private: integrated markets (here considered equivalent to 'private' institutions) played an effective role in heading off famine, sometimes by fostering new trade routes or damaging these by disproportionate price increases. The food distribution system called *annona*, of Roman origin, was the public institution*par excellence* used to avoid food shortages offering access to resources and enabling the markets to function and monitor prices. Public and private action sometimes clashed or colluded, however, thus generating many famines as a result of speculation, corruption, or divergent interests. Drawing up a balance sheet of the effectiveness of the various factors in resolving food shortages is thus complicated by the diversity of the characteristics of each single famine. The various authors agree, however, that the public institutions played a positive role in supplying the various social strata with food and that famines were almost always the outcome of the failure of institutions whose role it was to ensure supplies, be they public or private.

Finding a single consequence (or model of consequences) for famine is even more challenging. Whilst short term demographic change (increases in the death rate, decreases in the birth and marriage rates, increases in temporary and permanent migration) are clear, the responses of the various social classes were not slow in coming whether in the form of food riots, revolutions, or religious change. The medium-long term consequences were even more difficult to detect and diverse, sometimes involving full-blown agricultural innovations and sometimes changes in the socio-economic structure and an impoverishment of large swathes of society.

The various chapters offer wide-ranging in-depth study on these aspects, although some are more detailed and incisive in dealing with

the complex panorama of causes and consequences while others limit themselves (often in response to a lack of sources and case studies available from the secondary literature) to offering a famine chronology and primary considerations relating to the factors which triggered them. Consequently, certain essays are organised thematically while others are chronological. It is worth noting that this is a normal consequence of comparative and synthesis work based on variously in-depth historiographies on the theme, because the effort involved in giving structure and coherence to work is clear and the result praiseworthy.

As far as the individual case studies are concerned, certain important acquisitions have been made. For Italy, for example, the book highlights not only the central role played by the events of the so-called ‘seventeenth century crisis’ but also a more moderate perspective for the eighteenth century, fruit, also, of random factors which varied according to context. The book’s attention to man’s ability to generate famines locally is, in any case, intriguing - in sieges, for example - and, in normal times, to aggravate food production and trade conditions even in optimal years, thus allowing famines to be triggered. The trans-national character of famine is also worthy of attention making it impossible for those involved and the markets to stave off crisis. Borders were thus not fixed, a concept which is also to be found in other chapters (see Low Countries and England). For Spain, where the data is unfortunately very uneven across eras and contexts, the role of food riots is worthy of note, as E.P. Thompson already noted (an author who is under-referenced in the various essays), with these directed less at shortages *per se* than the liberalisation of the markets and changes in the trading system which governed the *Ancien Régime*. For France, where the historiography is more plentiful and difficult to summarise, the focus (as well as on natural and economic factors) is on the moral constraints which acted on the markets and their attempts at market speculation.

Even the factors enabling famines to be staved off are unusual. For Holland, rather than the central importance of Amsterdam as an international wheat market hub between northern and southern Europe which may have benefited these latter regions over others from a price-stabilisation perspective, it was the buying power of its people and salary levels which staved off crisis. Poverty assistance systems are also worthy of mention as these acted to distribute food and other primary goods to the people. These are elements which are also to be found in England, where buying power was kept high with institutional action such as the Poor Law which attributed every individual with a parish responsible for his or her support, thus avoiding mendacious behaviour between regions.

The northern European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Iceland) offer a different panorama where diversified agriculture and integrated markets acted as constraints on the development of famines while in Eastern Europe, the absence of sources and case studies notwithstanding, the geographical conditions contributed to various extents on the dissemination of famine between urban and industrial areas (the north) with supply shortages and agricultural areas (the south) with production surpluses.

The merits of this book are manifold. In the first place, neither its comparative effort nor its Europe-wide scope proceed at the expense of its analysis of the various contexts and it never loses sight of the multiplicity of factors which triggered famines nor of the insights it provides for extra-European regions or contemporary economics in developing regions. In the second place, as we saw above, rather than generating a single cause-effect model for famines, the book offers multiple potential solutions to overall questions, such as why a famine breaks out, by which communities and towns could come up with different but no less efficient solutions. Nevertheless, beyond the regional structure serving the purposes of comparison, growing connections between areas are visible - as some chapters reiterate (Italy, the Low Countries and England, primarily) - which are worthy of attention for future research. Looking for connections, also via the reconstruction of mercantile and financial networks which supported the supplying of vast geographical areas, in the same way as the redistribution networks set up independently by the lower classes to deal with famine, is one of the important stimuli offered by this book on the subject of a chapter in European history and the global present which is one of its most dramatic but also its most intriguing.