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## **From famine to food crisis. What history can teach us about local and global subsistence crises**

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### ***Abstract***

*The range of famine prone regions in the world has been shrinking for centuries; it's currently mainly limited to sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the impact of endemic hunger has not declined and the early 21st century seems to be faced with a new threat: global subsistence crises. In this essay I question the concepts of famine and food crisis. I will formulate some suggestions to understand these seemingly unrelated processes in a more integrated way. The article successively debates historical famine research, Europe's 'grand escape' from hunger, past and contemporary 'depeasantisation', and the state of 21st century food systems. Only more integrated models of interpretation can supersede the dualistic histories of food and famine that have been dominating developmentalist stories for so long.*

Famines are not what they used to be. By historical standards, the hunger crises of the past decades have been 'small' crises. Crop failures still remain a threat, but a combination of public action, market forces, and food aid tends to mitigate mortality. Although non-crisis death rates in hunger stricken regions like sub-Saharan Africa remain high, excess mortality due to famine tends to be low unless linked to war. That is why the ambition of recent famine historiography is not limited to explaining famines of the past, it's also to understand why they are less frequent today and will be even less frequent in the future (Ó Gráda 2009, 257-282). The fact that contemporary famines are less frequent and less severe than historical famines can be seen as a success story of world historical proportions. However, it is only a partial success story. Famine has not yet been eradicated. Moreover, food security is threatened by new forms of vulnerability, instigated by a new wave of 'globalisation' in economics and governance. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, total agricultural output rose faster (by a factor 2.6) than world population did (by a factor 2.4). This achievement, in a period of unprecedented population growth, is even more remarkable because the percentage of people engaged in agriculture has reduced worldwide from 65% in 1950 to 42% in 2000 (FAO Statistics). Even though the average per capita food supply rose by one fifth between 1960 and 2000, the number of undernourished people doubled. This means that the ratio has been stabilizing to around 15%<sup>1</sup> of the world population for some decades now. In 2007 and 2008 rapidly rising prices of agricultural commodities triggered the first 21<sup>st</sup> century food crisis, sometimes perceived as the first of a new type of global subsistence crises.

In this article I want to expand insights from historical famine research to the contemporary debate about a global food crisis. Famine, hunger and food crises are obviously related societal phenomena, but most of the times they are analyzed and interpreted from different viewpoints or realities. Temporal impacts and spatial scales differ enormously between the 'event' of a famine, the 'process' of hunger and the 'structure' of food insecurity. Yet they can only be understood in relationship to societal organisation and public responsibility. My central argument is that historical famine research is not only relevant for the 'lost' worlds of the past, it can also generate new knowledge about contemporary questions of hunger and food (in)security. I will elaborate my argument in four sections. In the first section I comment on the notion of 'famine as community crisis' as derived from historical famine research (1). In the following two sections I try to understand the European escape from famine (2) within the context of processes of depeasantisation (3). The fourth section investigates the heterodox interpretation of the first 21<sup>st</sup> century global food crisis (4) by focusing on the need for local responses. The European model of conquering the phantom of famine and hunger through radical depeasantisation has become a dead-end road. Both past and present research on food and famine has to surpass dualistic interpretations grounded in Eurocentric modernisation paradigms. This essay shows why historical famine research and peasant studies can be helpful in this process.

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of 'undernourished population' from FAO Statistics: 300 to 500 million in the 1960s (10-15% of the world population), 535 million in 1972-1974 (14%), 580 million in 1979-1981 (13%), 840 in 1990 (16%), 820 in 2000 (13%) and an estimated 1 billion in 2009 (15%). Earlier estimates from David Grigg (1982; 1985, 5-30, with some added figures in the second edition, 1993), and from Lucile F. Newman (1990, 395-396). David Grigg is very critical about the periodic revisions in the FAO definitions of undernourishment and malnourishment, such as the one responsible for the sudden rise of the 1980 numbers from 580 to 900 million.

### *Historical famine research*

Famine literature often lacks clear definitions of the related concepts famine, hunger, malnutrition and food crisis. Famine is mostly understood as an event, whereas hunger or malnutrition point at structural processes: 'The term famine indeed represents the upper end of the continuum whose average is "hunger". Malnutrition might be seen as slow-burning famine' (Ó Gráda 2009, 6). Traditional famines are mostly described as sudden shocks, almost always linked to natural disasters (rain, temperature) or ecological shocks (eruptions, blights, plagues). Common symptoms of famine crises include rising prices, food riots, increased crime against property, significant numbers of actual or imminent deaths from starvation, a rise in temporary migration, and frequently the emergence of famine-induced infectious diseases (Ó Gráda 2009, 6-7). Contemporary famine research has shifted the perception of hunger crises as natural or technical problems related to the disruption of a food system, to famines as a lack of accountability and failed responses by public actors (Devereux 2007). Famine crises should be perceived as a consequence of the breakdown of a social and economic system as well as a product of this system. That is why, according to authors like Devereux, 'new famines' are almost always political events because they are almost always preventable.

Over the past three decades, these new insights have strongly affected the nature of historical famine research. Subsistence crises, particularly European *Ancien Régime* crises, have been the subject of extensive historical research for a long time. Malthusian and Marxian perspectives dominated earlier writings; they focused on the relationship between famines and demographic crises, and on the impact of subsistence crises on revolutionary political events.<sup>2</sup> Famines only became visible when they could be 'measured'. That is why in its most basic statistical definition, a famine pointed at a 'severe' shortage of food accompanied by 'significant' increased mortality.<sup>3</sup> This approach encouraged former historical famine research to identify and measure crop failures and demographic crises. In the 1970s, following E.P. Thompson's moral economy approach, attention in food crisis research shifted to urban markets and the dialectic relationship between collective and public actions (Tilly 1971, Tilly 1975, Walter and Wrightson 1976). Inspired by a wave of new village studies and *Alltagsgeschichte*, from the 1980s onwards historians and social scientists tried to study and understand famines as integrated social phenomena, as communal processes, causing 'the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least-powerful groups in a community, to a point where, as a group, they can no longer maintain a sustainable livelihood' (Walker 1989, 6). The vulnerability of local societies to economic distress is not seen as solely the function of population numbers, markets and prices. It has to be related to a cluster of at least three critical factors: the impact of the crisis, the social and economic order, and the way people could keep control of their own fate, individually, within the household and in the local community. As Walter and Schofield noted in 1989, 'Famine is a collective problem, starvation an individual fate.'<sup>4</sup> This 'collective' level includes

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Meuvret 1946; Appleby 1980; Rotberg and Rabb 1983; Galloway 1988; Dupâquier 1989; Walter and Schofield 1989. Especially on famine and social and political order: Walter and Wrightson 1976; Labrousse 1943 and 1956.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Ó Gráda 2007, 5-6; Devereux 2007a; Howe and Devereux 2004, 355-356; Murton 2000; Cuny and Hill 1999, 1-16; Arnold 1988, 5-28.

<sup>4</sup> Walter and Schofield 1989, 26. See also: 'The social order mattered: as a critical determinant of demographic change, and as the basis of political as well as economic institutions, it fashioned the conditions of death, no less than those of life.' (73).

the impact of social differentiation (along the lines of income, gender and age), the strength of local institutions, and the structure of the regional economy.

This broader interpretation was triggered by the publications of the Indian economist Amartya Sen who, in his famous work *Poverty and Famines*, shifted the focus of famine research from the availability to the entitlement of food: 'Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat' (Sen 1983, 1, original italics). In his words, to understand famine we need to understand both ownership patterns and exchange entitlements, and the forces that lie behind them. 'This requires careful consideration of the nature of modes of production and the structure of economic classes as well as their interrelations' (Sen 1983, 6). Like the paradigm of a moral economy, this approach highlights the individual agency, the actions and reactions of men and women regarding a decreased 'command over food' (Ravallion 1997, 1206-1207). The paradigm of famine research is broadened with a new level of (individual) command over food (b) which is inserted between the former levels of (individual) availability of food (a) and (individual) suffering (c). This more complex model of interpretation did shed new light on the often nonlinear relationships between crop figures, market prices and mortality rates. This was also stressed by Louise Tilly, who was one of the first to take up the entitlement approach in historical research: 'The analysis of entitlements promises to complete the transformation of thinking about conflicts over food begun by Thompson, Rose, Walter, and Wrightson. (...) Entitlements are the mechanism which link ordinary people's experience to these large-scale processes' (Tilly 1983, 151).

The entitlement approach shifted focus from the availability of food (*production based*) to the distribution of food (*market based*). This triggered two new lines of analysis. One favoured the individual actor; the lack of purchasing power and/or property rights as a main cause of vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> The other looked at the functioning of food (grain) markets. A disturbance of the 'Smithian', open and competitive markets, is seen as one of the main causes for a decline in food entitlements (Persson 1999). Both arguments fail, as Devereux has pointed out, to take into account the 'importance of institutions in determining entitlements', including households and village communities (*transfer based*) (Devereux 2007b, 84). Internal household power relationships usually remain hidden, as do what he calls 'fuzzy entitlements', entitlements generated from communal property regimes, rights or claims over resources that are held collectively. 'Rights can also be exercised at varying levels, from ownership (the strongest form, including rights of disposal) to access and usufruct rights (the weakest form, where ownership and use are often separated) (Devereux 2007b, 83).

Within these debates, famines are singled out as 'community crises'; moments of tension when scarcity and human suffering are accompanied and aggravated by social breakdowns. 'A syndrome with webs of causation through which communities lose their ability to support marginal members who consequently either migrate in families because lack of access to food, or die of starvation or starvation related disease' (Currey and Hugo 1984, 1). That's why famines are both unique experiences occupying a finite span of historical time and human experience and recurring patterns revealing insight in a society's deeper structures (Murton 2000, 1414). Recent comparative research on the European potato famine of the 1840s showed that 'the causes and effects of the subsistence crisis of the 1840s cannot be evaluated on a national scale. Regional differences are a key feature. Only in Ireland did the famine grow into a national disaster, and even then its incidence

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the works of de Soto 2000.

varied considerably by region. In the rest of Europe, the crisis was examined and handled as a regional event'. Famines are regional crises which can only be understood by the 'local story' (Vanhaute, Paping, Ó Gráda 2007, 34; Solar 1997, 123).

The notion of famine as an event (sudden crisis), a process (accelerated destitution) and a structure (the breakdown of societal networks) creates the need for a more integrated famine research project. This project combines several research lines. First, it has to measure the direct impact of a food crisis, in traditional terms expressed in measures of food availability decline (crops and livestock production, market provisioning), human suffering (mortality, health and disease), and adapted demographic strategies (marriage, fertility, migration). Secondly, we have to understand the formal and informal coping strategies that deal with acute forms of stress as well as the reactions from and possible reorganisation of the livelihoods of these families (Howe and Devereux 2004, 356-358). Thirdly, a re-examination of rural subsistence crises must aim at a broader interpretation of the societal context, of families, neighbourhoods, villages, and public authorities. Last but not least, historical famine research needs to address more contemporary famine theory. Even though historians have learned a lot from contemporary studies, historical famine research that integrates the different fields of analysis mentioned above is still scarce.<sup>6</sup>

### *Europe's escape from famine*

In Europe, the classic famine crisis has been in retreat for three or four centuries. England and Northern Italy witnessed their last famines in the seventeenth century. Eighteenth and nineteenth century mortality peaks in France and the Low Countries were modest relative to previous centuries, even in the dear years of 1740-1741, 1794-95, 1816-1818 and 1845-1848. It seems that the European history of famine, except the Finnish hunger winter of 1868, ended in 1845-1848 with the 'big bang' of the Irish Famine, one of the most devastating food crises in world history. It is plausible to link this reduction of the risk of famine in (Western) Europe to gradual improvements in agricultural productivity, better communications and some gains, although modest and slow, in economic growth and living standards (Vanhaute, Paping and Ó Gráda 2007, 35-36). Improvements in nutritional intake were tardy but substantial (Fogel 1992). However, they could not prevent the structural malnutrition of the bottom 20% nor could they stop the hunger catastrophe in the 1840s. As we argued in a comparative analysis of the potato famine in Europe, this hunger crisis combined 'traditional' and 'modern' characteristics. In some regions, Ireland in particular, the potato blight recalled and even surpassed famines of an earlier age. At the same time, the crisis took place in a context of considerable market integration and food transfers across national borders. In Ireland, the crisis prompted the country to import foreign grain and it prompted mass, long-distance migration (Vanhaute, Paping and Ó Gráda, 2007, 38).

As Walter and Schofield have stressed, the disappearance of large-scale famines in England was related to the remarkable rise of agricultural production and to the reorganisation and strengthening of local entitlement support: 'Protection against dearth and the provision of grain came publicly and formally through the system of communally organized and funded welfare provision represented by the poor law' (Walter and Schofield

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<sup>6</sup> 'Interestingly enough, it is more often demographers and economists, geographers, anthropologists and political scientists, rather than historians, who have made the running in the recent discussions of famine and who have advanced many of the most challenging theories' (Arnold 1988, 1).

1989, 46). Changes in the social and economic order in Early Modern England transformed the pattern and degree of vulnerability from 'exogenous' epidemics and local food crises to new, structural forms of poverty and disease including airborne infections (Walter and Schofield 1989, 66-67). Proletarianization of labour and commercialisation of goods and services created new forms of vulnerability such as insecure labour exchange entitlements and a growing dependency on often unstable markets. This created the need for new public goods and more protective systems. 'Moreover, the necessity of finding an alternative means of support for the elderly when family obligations are weak, strengthens the notion of the indispensability of the role of collective action, in which officials and magistrates are seen to be acting for the public good, rather than in the interest of some arbitrary political power' (Walter and Schofield 1989, 32-33).

Europe's 'escape from hunger' is an unprecedented achievement in world-historical perspective. But only after 1850 did a massive increase in food availability go hand in hand with more food security, declining relative food prices and a decimating agricultural population. This process could only be sustained in a rapidly changing, globalizing and ever more unequal world. Being on the top of the international power hierarchy, Europe could support its process of de-agrarianization with massive, cheap imports of raw materials and basic food stuffs and an impressive export of tens of millions of surplus labourers to the 'neo-Europes'.<sup>7</sup> In some of these peripheries, former local and regional food regimes collapsed. As Mike Davis argued 'there is persuasive evidence that peasants and farm labourers became dramatically more prenable to natural disaster after 1850 as their local economies were violently incorporated into the world market.' The commodification of smallholder production, the addition of millions of tropical cultivators into the world market, and the weakening or destruction of local and state-level autonomy by colonialism and imperialism tended to undermine traditional food security outside Europe (Davis 2001, e.g. 288-291). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United Kingdom imported more than 70% of the grain, flour and dairy produce and 40% of the meat it consumed (Arnold 1988, 70). This achievement legitimated the strong and appealing message that Europe sent out to the outer world, a combined message of modernisation, depeasantisation, industrialisation and economic integration, tied together in a new 'theory of progress'. At the same time this message carried the promise of individual wealth and collective protection. The discovery of a 'social question' in the West is the basis of an integrative modernisation paradigm. In the 'global South' this was translated in its most basic derivation as the 'fight against hunger' (Vernon 2007, 13-14).

Just like in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the world history of famine had its final 'big bang' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Absolute numbers of famine victims have never been higher (estimated at 70 to 80 million), with outliers in the USSR in 1921-1922 (6% of the population) and 1932-1933 (4%), Bengal in 1942-1944 (3%), China in 1959-1961 (2%) and North Korea in 1995-2000 (3-4%).<sup>8</sup> In relative terms 20<sup>th</sup> century famine-related mortality declined rapidly, especially after 1960. Famines that killed more than a few percent of the total population became unusual (Ó Gráda 2002, 3). Both imperialism and totalitarianism interfered with this trend. Colonial conquest often invoked severe famine mortality (Spanish America, British

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<sup>7</sup> Regions outside Europe dominated by Caucasians: North and South America, Australia, New Zealand. Today these regions produce more than 70% of all wheat and maize exports, two of the three major grain crops. The term was coined by Alfred Crosby (Manning 2004, 52).

<sup>8</sup> See Ó Gráda 2007, 25-30. Between brackets the estimated excess mortality as % of the total population. Compare to Ireland 1846-1852: 12%.

Ireland, British India, German Namibia). The imperialist expansion of the London-centred world economy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century did invoke, in the words of Mike Davis, ‘Victorian holocausts’ in the peripheries (India, China, Brazil). This impelled Davis to ask the pertinent question: ‘How do we explain the fact that in the very half-century when peacetime famine permanently disappeared from Western Europe, it increased so devastatingly throughout much of the colonial world?’ (Davis 2001, 8-9). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, totalitarianism greatly increased the human cost of policy mistakes by governments. The damage caused by poor harvests during the last two centuries was greatly exacerbated by political action. This, in turn, promoted the idea that the problem of famine could be solved. As Cormac Ó Gráda stated: ‘In today’s developed world the conviction that famines are an easily prevented anachronism, and therefore a blot on global humanity, is widespread and gaining ground. That makes them a continuing focus for activism and an effective vehicle for raising consciousness about world poverty’ (Ó Gráda 2009, 3).

### *Old and new peasantries*

The reduction of famine, and more broadly hunger, has become a central justification behind Europe’s ‘theory of progress’ as demonstrated by James Vernon (Vernon 2008). Together with the eradication of backwardness, peasantries were condemned as relics of the past (and often as the main cause behind famine). Depeasantisation has become a reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2007, the United Nations declared that for the first time in human history more than half the world’s population was living in cities and towns.<sup>9</sup> Less developed regions will hit the half-way point later, but more than likely before 2020.

#### *Rural population (% total population)*

	Total (billion)	World % (billion)	Africa	Asia	Mi-So Am	North Am	Europe
<b>1950</b>	<b>2.54</b>	<b>71%</b> <b>(1.79)</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>49%</b>
1970	3.70	64% (2.37)	77%	77%	43%	26%	37%
1990	5.29	57% (3.02)	68%	68%	29%	25%	29%
<b>2000</b>	<b>6.12</b>	<b>53%</b> <b>(3.27)</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>27%</b>
2010	6.91	49% (3.41)	60%	57%	21%	18%	26%
<b>2030</b>	<b>8.32</b>	<b>40%</b> <b>(3.35)</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>21%</b>

The impact of this cannot be overestimated. The domestication of a small selection of plants and mammals during the Neolithic Revolution marked the start of the creation of new and unseen forms of wealth and poverty. The birth of agrarian civilisations created the world as we have known it for most of our history (the past 10,000 years); a world based on the fruits of the labour of vast peasantries (Crosby 1986; Diamond 1997, 85-92, 292; Manning 2004, 33-34, 68). All over the world, peasants have organised themselves in rural households and village communities. As agricultural producers, they were part of a circular, solar-based ecosystem. They had access to land and natural resources, either as smallholders, tenants or as users of common goods. They pooled different forms of income via localized systems of production, exchange and credit. They were part of larger societal systems that extracted

<sup>9</sup> *State of World Population 2007*, report from the United Nations. Data from *World Urbanization Prospects. The 2007 Revision Population Database* (<http://esa.un.org/unup>).

surpluses either directly (via rents or taxation) or via unequal market relationships (Vanhaute 2008, 42-43). During the last five centuries, historical capitalism gradually incorporated world peasantries into a new, globalizing division of labour. New systems of production, including forced labour and cottage industries, transferred increasingly more wealth to the growing non-agricultural sectors. Until very recently, peasant production, albeit more exploited than ever, was the major source of wealth in the world. At the same time, new forms of enclosure increasingly limited open access to land, to commons such as natural resources and collective knowledge, and even to family labour. This combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of this unprecedented, successful economic system.

This trend widened and deepened dramatically during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Massive declines in the reliance on agriculture (de-agrarianisation), erosion of the family basis of peasant livelihoods (depeasantisation), and an exodus from the countryside (urbanization and growing slumps) are redefining the place and the nature of peasantries. Vulnerability, the link between risk and the precariousness of people's livelihood, has always been part of their existence. A diversification of income and coping strategies (individual, in the household and in the village) has been the main answer. However, a continuing erosion of the family basis of livelihoods has created new forms of vulnerability. According to Frank Ellis, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being (Ellis 2006, 393). This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification, such as taking up non-farm activities and relying on non-farm income transfers. Rural household income becomes less based on farm activities and on the exploitation of assets. This erodes former household and village security mechanisms and affects their ability to overcome short-term economic stress, such as harvest shortages or variations in income or food prices from one year to the next or even within shorter time spans (Bengsston 2004, 33-35).

In order to report and understand old and new forms of vulnerability, especially regarding food security, we need to know how peasant populations coped with uncertainty and vulnerability in the past and how they are coping in the present. We have to know how peasants coped with stress. Was it by diversifying their means of income, by defending their rights of access to resources, land and commons, by internalizing rising social and ecological costs? How did and do peasants define and redefine their 'peasant spaces'? When and why did they succeed? When did they fail? Historical research shows that famines were seldom only acts of God. Food shortages only became a famine when an accelerated process of rising individual malnutrition and household destitution concurred with social breakdown. In most cases in history, famines had no lasting effects on societal developments or population growth (Devereux 1993; Howe and Devereux 2004, Ó Gráda 2009, 1-25). The threats to individual 'lives' (malnutrition, suffering) were usually countered by adaptations in peasant 'livelihoods' (informal and formal coping and protection systems). Famines triggered by harvest failures only occurred when societal institutions failed. The faltering or breakdown of markets, labour, credit and protection systems cut households off from their income and endowments. Individual, household and local coping strategies such as public credit, insurance and support systems (in other words peasant survival systems) determined the outcome of a decline in food availability (Osmani 1998, 172-174; Skoufias 2003, 1087-1102). This knowledge has to redefine the research agenda regarding past and contemporary societies and old and new famines alike. Old and new threats of famine and food crisis can

only be understood within the context of changing manners of growth, adaptation and resistance in the peasantry.

### *From local to global subsistence crises*

As stated above, famines have traditionally been described as short-term events, confined to restricted geographical areas and, in most cases, taking the lives of limited numbers of people. These famines have been studied as remnants of a peasant past or, in the words of Ó Gráda, as hallmarks of economic backwardness (Ó Gráda 2009, 9). Modern famines are regarded as avoidable humanitarian crises, or more bluntly, as crimes against humanity.<sup>10</sup> That is why contemporary famine research has moved towards a political theory of famine prevention. When looking at the relationship between famine, hunger and poverty, new questions arise, to paraphrase Sen and Drèze: Why does India's success story in famine prevention in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seem to have done little help to combat chronic hunger? (Sen and Drèze 1991, 3-7).<sup>11</sup> The fact that fighting famines did not prevent the spread of endemic hunger remains one of the most puzzling paradoxes of our times. This question has brought an old and a new perspective into the contemporary famine debate. The first one tries to re-edify Malthus by arguing that world population growth will outstrip food supplies. This question has been pending since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with peaks in 'the doomsday debates' just after the Second World War, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Grigg 1985; Linner 2003, 199-209). The standard answer, endorsed by the expanding agribusiness, has been new 'green revolutions', an increased caloric output per capita.<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, biotechnological innovations such as GMCs are at the centre of the debate, often with little reference to the broader question of the division of knowledge, assets and wealth.

The second argument points at the oblique relationship within the global food system. By analysing 'Victorian famines' (the three global subsistence crises in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Mike Davis attached great weight to the increasing development arrears in the periphery of 'a London-centred world economy' (Davis 2001, 6-7). By placing famine in a broader perspective of societal changes and global food security, the very character and perception of the concept changed. From 'an endemic disease in peasant societies' (Arnold), 'incorporated into man's biological regime' (Braudel), and 'the very badge of civilisation' (Manning), famine and hunger have shifted from more or less timeless concepts to powerful weapons in the ideological debate about the contemporary society (Arnold 1988, 50; Braudel 2002, 73, Manning 2004, 69). As Vernon demonstrated, Imperial Britain played a formative role in the changing meaning of hunger. Although it had rid itself of large-scale subsistence crises, hunger remained endemic both within Britain's working classes as well as throughout its expanding empire (Vernon 2007, 2-3). According to Amartya Sen, endemic hunger 'kills in a more concealed matter (...) It all happens rather quietly without any clearly visible deaths from hunger.(...) While regular hunger is largely a

<sup>10</sup> The criminalisation of famine proposes political responsibility as the prime and sometimes only cause: Edkins 2007; de Waal 1997, 1-6, 213-221; Plümper and Neumayer 2009.

<sup>11</sup> 'The persistence of hunger in many countries in the contemporary world is related not merely to a general lack of affluence, but also to substantial -often extreme- inequalities within society' (Id, 8).

<sup>12</sup> In the South the so-called 'green revolutions' promoted the extensive industrial farming of a small number of mass crops: wheat, corn, rice, soya, sometimes called the crops of the poor and the livestock.

result of inadequate entitlements on a continuing basis, famines are the result of disastrous declines of entitlements that typically occur rather suddenly' (Sen 1990, 376). Over time, the predominant character of hunger has shifted from frequent food shortages to chronic food poverty. This change of scale has placed an unprecedented number of people at peril of hunger at the same time (Newman 1990, 394-401; Dando 1980, 90-91).

The globalisation of the problem of hunger is closely related to the emergence of a global food system in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McMichael, 2009). A new acceleration occurred after 1950 with the internationalisation of inputs to the food system and of food itself, with the rise of agribusiness, and from the 1980s with the seductive call for open markets and agricultural specialisation as engines of development (Millman 1990, 307-308). The 'liberation' of agricultural trade and the massive dumping of food surpluses dramatically increased food dependency in the South. The trade balance shifted from a surplus of 1 billion dollar in 1979 to a deficit of 11 billion dollar in 2001. Trade deregulation programs and the neglect of local production systems further weakened the position of small peasant producers in the South (Akram-Lodhi 2009). Investments in the 'green revolution' provoked severe losses in biodiversity and crop diversity and promoted ecological degradation.

The increased concentration of production chains and the growing vulnerability of smallholders, still about 50% of the world's population, pushed international organisations to revise their position on the problem of hunger and food security in the 1990s. The *World Bank Report 1995* shifted the focus toward poverty reduction because 'hunger is the most deplorable manifestation of poverty'.<sup>13</sup> New growth strategies, new technologies, and new investments in individual capacities were seen as major solutions. When the effective eradication of famine crises seemed realistic for the first time in history, the world was confronted with what seemed to be a new type of global food crisis in 2006-2008. Between 1974 and 2005 food prices on world markets fell by three-quarters in real terms. In 2006 and 2007 they jumped by 75%. The *Economist Food Price Index* was higher than any time since it was created in 1845.<sup>14</sup> In 2007 and 2008 20 countries faced severe food riots. In October 2008, 33 countries were reported to be in a state of a severe food crisis.<sup>15</sup> This 'food price crisis' revealed the vulnerability of global food chains in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rising prices were not the result of disturbances in local supply and demand but were triggered by global market fluctuations and price settings. World grain reserves shrank to a long-time low of fifty days.

These events did put agriculture back on the international development agenda after being neglected for more than two decades. According to international organisations, the first 21<sup>st</sup> century food crisis was manmade; it was caused by 'short-run overshooting' (bad harvests, low food stocks, export bans, speculation) and long-run negative shifts (population growth, demand for animal feed, biofuel policies). This combination was intensified because agriculture was neglected in development theory and policies over the last 25 years (the 'lost decades'), and due to climate change. It became clear that the 'green revolution' of the 1970s and 1980s had run out of steam. Technological innovations and production gains had generated high social and ecological costs in addition to considerable production gains (Ross

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<sup>13</sup> *The World Bank's Strategy for reducing poverty and hunger. A report to the development community, 1995, 1.*

<sup>14</sup> 'The end of cheap food', *The Economist*, 6 December 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Global Hunger Index. The challenge of hunger 2008*, <http://www.welthungerhilfe.de/global-hunger-index-2008.html>

2003). The policy reforms promoted in the *World Development Report 2008* are mostly supply driven. The central purpose is to develop the 'capacities' of small farmers. The peasantry has been rediscovered, they are to become an engine of growth and development. In order to become a player on the world market, these small-scale farmers need to be 'empowered', made more competitive by increasing their productivity ('greening the green revolution'), by facilitating access to markets, credit, assistance, seed and fertilizers, by securing access to land, and by strengthening communities and social protection ('social embedding'). Most criticized is the Bank's unchallenged axiom of market participation, or better: the framing of the story of empowerment in the context of trade liberalisation.<sup>16</sup> According to its critics, the *World Bank Report* fails to come to grips with the new power relationships in the (world) marketplace (agro corporations), the vast asymmetries in market chains, and the question of equity in labour markets. Most importantly, it fails to interpret the food crisis as a crisis in both food security and food sovereignty.<sup>17</sup>

The liberalisation of food markets and the expansion of the 'corporate food regime' over the last three decades have thoroughly affected the nature of food chains and the peasantry's position. The policy of deregulating and opening up markets served the goal of fighting hunger by multiplying supplies and lowering prices. The stretching (and commodification) of food chains, the delinking of production from consumption and the concentration of decision making have generated an unprecedented flow of cheap foodstuffs while aggravating the vulnerability of our food regime (Akram-Lodhi 2009, Exenberger 2009). Unstable markets and price volatility affect the food security of millions of families. The remaining world peasantries find no secure place in the integrated global market and have to rely on ever more insecure income resources. These changes have affected the entitlement position (of food, income, access to land and credit, etc.) of an unprecedented number of people.

The fight against world hunger in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shifted the notion of protection or food security from the preservation of peasant bound production systems to general access to cheap market goods. This change came at a high price, primarily affecting the remaining peasant populations and the global commons (FAO 2008). The first 21<sup>st</sup> century food crisis revealed that the monomaniac policy of high production growth rates and low world prices is a dead end solution. It amplified the call for new, more powerful institutional arrangements that strengthen rural communities and national regulations in order to facilitate and strengthen the interests of small farmers and agricultural labourers. What is needed is not less but more protection of rural producers, local agricultural production systems and sustainable ecological development. This analysis fundamentally questions the traditional conceptualizations of development, food production and social protection. 'Development programs' that were created in the last three decades and that leaned

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<sup>16</sup> Oxfam International (*What agenda now for agriculture. A response to the World Development Report 2008*, 19 October 2007, [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/trade/bn\\_wdr2008.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/trade/bn_wdr2008.html); EcoFair Trade Dialogue, *The World Bank's WDR 2008: Agriculture for Development. Response from Slow Trade - Sound Farming Perspective*, November 2007, [http://www.ecofair-trade.org/pics/en/EcoFair\\_Trade\\_Paper\\_No\\_10\\_Murphy\\_Santarius.pdf](http://www.ecofair-trade.org/pics/en/EcoFair_Trade_Paper_No_10_Murphy_Santarius.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> The concept of food security points at the availability of food. Food sovereignty sees food as a human right with 'just prices' and 'just policies' drawn on a deep, historical reservoir of moral economic sensibilities (Edelman 2005, 341). It prioritises local production over (cheap) imports, protection over open markets. It aims at a re-localisation of food power by rebuilding national food regimes (Eric Holtz-Giménez 2008; Rajeev Patel 2006, 2007).

towards the European experience of the 'grand escape' have not solved the lingering question of food insecurity. On the contrary, they have aggravated the vulnerability of world populations, especially of the lowest 50%.

### *Conclusion*

The range of famine prone regions in the world has been shrinking for centuries; it's currently mainly limited to sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the impact of endemic hunger has not declined and the early 21st century seems to be faced with a new threat: global subsistence crises. This essay aims to help readers understand these seemingly unrelated processes. In an effort to bridge some disciplinary gaps, I have combined some insights from recent research about historical famines, about Europe's 'grand escape', about the fate of past and present peasantries and about the state of 21<sup>st</sup> century food systems. These insights can be summarized as follows:

1. Food crises are community crises in which human suffering resulting from deficiencies in the food chain are corroborated or mitigated by local, regional or national systems of credit and protection.
2. Throughout most of recent human history (starting with the agricultural revolution), peasant institutions have been the most stable and effective survival systems. When they were not enfeebled or destroyed by internal collapse or external pressure, they were usually able to deal with sudden food crises.
3. Due to high social and ecological costs, the European model of escaping from famine and hunger through depeasantisation cannot be globalised. The dissolution of informal peasant systems of protection presumes the edification of substitute formal social security networks. Even in Europe this was a century-long process. Moreover, the huge external costs linked to the European model of living, working and consuming cannot be multiplied in a finite world.
4. The first global food crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has shown that sustainable food security cannot be obtained by further expanding the global food market; we must protect more 'localized' food systems.

When debating food, famine and hunger, we debate the food chain from production and transfers to consumption. This includes the availability of food (food provisioning), entitlement to food (food security) as well as control over food (food sovereignty). For far too long the success of the European escape from famine has narrowed the scope to the production of cheap calories. Hunger, food insecurity and food inequality were not eradicated. Faster and more efficient communication and transport networks have reduced the impact of 'classic' local and regional famines. However, new imbalances in the global marketplace have increased the threat of a global food crisis. Whereas short-term famines seem to have been overcome by marginalizing local survival systems and integrating markets, the roots of a global food crisis must be found in these processes of depeasantisation and neo-liberal globalisation. History has shown that smallholder agriculture can be a central barrier against different forms of food insecurity. Today's concerns about food chains indicate that the social and ecological costs of the 'corporate model' are too high.

In *The Great Transformation* Karl Polanyi wrote: 'The catastrophe of the native community is a direct result of the rapid and violent disruption of the basic institutions of the victim (...). These institutions are disrupted by the very fact that a market economy is

foisted upon an entirely differently organized community; labour and land are made into commodities, which, again, is only a short formula for the liquidation of every and any cultural institution in an organic society (....). Indian masses in the second half of the nineteenth century did not die of hunger because they were exploited by Lancashire; they perished in large numbers because the Indian village community had been demolished.’ (Polanyi 1957, 159; cited by Davis 2001, 10) The 21<sup>st</sup> century food crisis, and by extension the social and ecological crisis of the capitalist world-system, forces us to rethink the traditional, dualistic perception of peasants in the modern world. Famines (societal crises well-defined in time and space) could be countered for the most part by internal survival mechanisms in the short-run and by new technological solutions (agricultural revolutions) in the long-run. The extent of a lingering global food crisis calls for answers that surpass this regional level. However, the global answer is rooted in local knowledge. Historical and contemporary research shows that ‘inclusive’ peasant means of production, based on localized systems of credit, exchange and protection, are the most stable way to guarantee the survival of the majority of the world’s population. Small-scale agriculture is more productive than other agrarian systems; it can generate considerable surpluses, it supports more enduring protective systems, and the social and ecological costs are less externalized. As stressed by many others, this presumes a policy shift from the technocratic focus on productivity and markets towards biodiversity, polyculture, ecological recycling, internalized costs and regulated systems of exchange.

In Imperial Britain, the story of modernity became partially organised around the conquest of hunger (Vernon 2007, 4). After World War II, the new global community adopted the world food problem as a central political topic. By then a new understanding of hunger as a global social problem requiring government intervention had firmly taken root. Famine and hunger were perceived as remnants of the past, to be countered with modernisation strategies adopted from the European experience. Green revolutions and market integration became the central leitmotifs, especially after the retreat of state interventions in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, we forgot the flip side of the European development model: an investment in strong and protective welfare states. Persistent absolute poverty rates and new rhetoric regarding poverty reduction in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century were the first signs of limits of standard development schemes. The first global food crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century uncovered the flawed fundamentals under these policies. A critical examination of the history of famines, of the trajectory of peasantries and of the origins of the European model, provides us with fresh insights that can help us supersede the dualistic lines of thinking that have been burdening our developmentalist perspectives for far too long.

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