

Free Press, Democracy and the Prevention of Famines

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NEIL GROGAN, AUG 28 2013

A Free Press and Democracy Serve Better to Prevent Famines than Strategies Aimed at Raising Agricultural Production. Discuss.

“Famine seems to be the last, most dreadful resource of nature” – Rev. Thomas R. Malthus (1798)

“Indeed were it not for famines due to civil strifes or autarkic despotism, mankind today would be on the verge of ‘making famine history’” – Cormac Ó Gráda (2008)

Famine theory has progressed significantly since the publication of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, culminating at a point where contemporary Nobel Laureates can claim to have found famine’s panacea. That is not to say that famine has, like smallpox, been eradicated as a blight of the past. Indeed, North Korea experienced a famine as recent as 2001 in which one million people perished. So why is there a discrepancy between theory and reality? This work hopes to address that issue, by analysing the factors that prevented, created, sustained, and ended famine across recent history.

Current debates around famine are separated along several lines. There are those who believe, or spread the belief, that famine is a simple result of devastatingly bad luck. Others believe it to be due to a shift in the capabilities of those affected. Another set of analysts go further; they propose that famines are “a result of more complex mapping in which current social, economic, and health factors conflate to undermine the agricultural sector” (McClelland 2006:315). The first camp therefore would prevent famines by simply increasing agricultural production. The latter camps would say that famines are symptoms of society that resonate all the way to their very foundations. This essay will assess the merits of each by discussing the statement “a free press and democracy serve better to prevent famines than strategies aimed at raising agricultural production”. This work finds that famines are a result of the machinations of human agency, rather than acts of nature. Democracy, and its various checks on human agency, is therefore better famine prevention than single-minded agricultural expansion.

To begin with, it is essential to understand the factors framing this debate. Democracy, a particularly difficult concept, will be defined here as implying “the existence of societal institutions which exercise checks and balances on government” (Banik 2007:8). The most important of these institutions are a vibrant and active press, opposition political parties, parliament and judiciary. Famine will be defined as a ‘proportion of a population not having enough food to eat, leading to significant starvation deaths’. ‘Raising agricultural production’ will be defined as any policy aimed at increasing agricultural output per capita.

At the heart of this debate are 3 causal theories of famine: Food Availability Decline (FAD), Entitlement Failures, and a failure in a Political Contract. FAD, the most traditional of the theories, blames “factors such as climate, demographic change or decline in natural resources in the aggregate availability of food compared with the requirement of it” (Dowlah 2006:345). Entitlement failures are a nuanced critique of FAD as espoused by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. Crudely, they describe scenarios where members of society find that a combination of the value of their endowments (mostly labour), production possibilities (technology/land) and exchange conditions have shifted dramatically (Sen 1999:162). This results in their exclusion from commanding any control over the acquisition of food or its pricing. This view is coupled with Sen’s contentious claim that famines never happen in democracies. In

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the third theory, Sen's approach is criticised for being too simplistic. According to Alex De Waal, as long as a political contract exists which creates political incentives for governments to respond to the will of the people then famine will be prevented. With different incentive structures the government can, in some cases, serve itself better by ignoring the *vox populi*. Four other components of the disaster are significant:

"The first is the visibility of the crisis, second its political salience, third the nature of the constituency effect, and fourth the availability of technologies to respond" (De Waal 2006:134).

This essay believes the above theories to be reductive when separate; FAD for isolating only one causal factor, 'Entitlements' for being too broad, and 'Contracts' for not representing the real world. Rather, this work believes that famines are caused by human agency rather than environmental circumstances. It is for this reason that this essay prefers a system of checks and balances upon human agency rather than relying simply on purported improvements in agricultural production, which would leave human agency to run amok.

The elevation of famines from a simple dearth of food to societal dislocations in the mind of the analyst has been relatively recent. However, harking back to one of the more detrimental famines in history, the Irish Famine in "Black '49", one can observe a feature pertaining to all famines since: an alienation of those affected by those in power (Sen 1999:170). This alienation can be intentional, even a deliberate part of warfare, or can be synthesised by roadblocks in the dissemination of information. It is this part of democracy, the free flow of information that trumps agricultural production. This manifests itself by enabling a *free, independent press*. The Indian media provides a perfect example, being "generally regarded as plural, independent and a role model for the Third World" (Banik 2007:97). Since independence India has experienced several food crises, particularly between the mid 1960s and early 1970s, bringing it to the brink of famine. However, with a press that could decry Central and Regional administration as being, 'incompetent', 'bungling', 'unimaginative', and 'unresponsive', famine was averted (Banik 2007:100).

This is in sharp contrast to India's most powerful neighbour, China. The Chinese example demonstrates clearly that even where a political contract exists to prevent famine, it may fail. In a centralised or authoritarian government, political incentives can usurp popular opinion without reproach. In Mao's China, a rural policy was implemented which promoted equality, favouring large units of rural organisations to take advantage of economies of scale and scope (Yang and Fubing 1998:142). However, in reality it was mismanaged by careerists in a "climate of misinformation, exaggeration and propaganda", and the famine of 1959-61 was a direct result of the withholding of information at all levels of the Chinese bureaucracy (D'Souza 1994:370/1). This provides a contemporary example of a time where distorted information channels subverted a policy to raise agricultural production. It also debunks De Waal's 'political contract' theory, as the Chinese famine revealed that contract to be nothing more than a promise. Upon failure to uphold that promise, *and* in the absence of social security systems, there was nothing for those affected to fall back on, leading to the worst-case scenario.

To understand how this worst-case scenario comes to pass it is important to fully understand the nature of famine. Famine can strike in years where boom harvests have been reaped, and yet there are hundreds of thousands of deaths by starvation in the same region. This incongruous tragedy is mitigated in a democracy where a governmental bureaucracy is held to account by an empowered electorate. In Bengal in 1943 a boom famine

"occurred amidst a relative abundance of food, affecting mostly agricultural workers, who did not share in the inflationary rise enjoyed by many other sections of the community in the war economy" (Dowlah 2006:351).

This contradiction exemplifies the folly of depending solely on raising agricultural production as a method of famine prevention. It is here that Sen's work brilliantly describes how, when least expected, famine can attack parts of society who find themselves suddenly bereft of the entitlements that they once enjoyed.

A fisherman in Bengal suffered multiple shocks, which combined to cripple his livelihood and thus his command over food. Under fear of a Japanese attack there was a deliberate removal of rice and paddy and a 'boat denial', which limited how large his boat could be. Food prices increased, reducing his purchasing power, which was exacerbated by a reducing income (his customers could no longer afford fish). Administrative chaos further stripped fishermen of

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their entitlements. A government commission into calculating the rice supplies typifies the contemporary bureaucratic disorder; in retrospect its administrator acknowledged that 'of course at the time no one knew what the real position was' (Ó Grádá 2005:23). Wartime priorities inhibited free speech, preventing the delay in the proclamation of famine conditions. Speculation about hoarding was rife, even though a high profile campaign located only 100,000 tons of rice.

A similar devastation of entitlements occurred in during the 1984-85 Ethiopian famine in Wollo. Here, the government ascribed the famine to drought and soil erosion, masking the root causes of war, resettlement policies, and agricultural reforms. Famine occurred not because the "food did not travel to stricken Wollo because of a lack of transport, but a lack of the resident's entitlements controlling food" (Sen 1993:37). In fact, FAD is often used to mask authoritarian governmental ineptitude or negligence to evade responsibility for failed disaster mitigation programs.

Bengal and Ethiopia's plight highlights the key role of democracy in serving to protect a nation from famine. Democracy implies that affected citizens can exert a degree of control over their purchasing power, by holding their leaders to account through a free press and elections. A citizen's lobbying power can be wielded when the political contract is broken. In contrast, even in an agriculturally prolific, centrally controlled economy, the "equitable and adequate distribution of food is entirely dependent on the whim of the government" (D'Souza 1994:369).

While democracy may be a necessary factor in the fight against famine, it is worth noting that it is not sufficient. It is on this point that Sen's work is criticised for being reductive. Olivier Rubin, one of Sen's detractors, states that there is a correlation between the age of a political system and its exposure to famine. Most democracies are relatively young in comparison to other forms of governance. Many democracies are wealthy, and are better placed to receive aid from like-minded donors. Nor is every democracy the same, and their diversity and complexity are no guarantee that optimal outcomes will be achieved. In fact Rubin notes, "politicisation of the famine fosters the incentive to assume political stances relative to other actors" (Rubin 2009:705). Swift, sufficient action does not necessarily follow political clamour; indeed, indecision may slow down the process.

Not only are democracies variable across the globe but they are variable across time. Globalisation provides us with a case study in the changing nature of governance systems, which is noteworthy for the fight against famine. Increased scrutiny by an Internet age increases the dissemination of information where it can. However, it is possible too that an increasing number of international organisations and humanitarian actors could undermine the resilience mechanisms of a sovereign state. In fact, only 4% of official humanitarian aid was invested in disaster risk reduction between 2006 and 2010 (Development Initiatives 2012:6). It is important to understand that democracy doesn't exist in a bubble, and will vary as a system over time. It is these variations that dictate how effective it will be at preventing famine. Some democracies will fare better than others. This is why democracy is a necessary but not sufficient condition in combating famine.

To conclude, it is the multi-faceted nature of checks and balances in democracy that trumps single-minded agricultural expansion. A free press is at the heart of a free democracy, raising awareness, providing critique, and representing its readership. Where agriculture fails, then the lobbying capabilities of citizens enables political response. In the opposite situation, citizens lack any command over their own entitlements, and this isolation leads to famine.

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Date written: May 2013