Starvation: A Political Phenomenon

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Starvation and famine steal the lives of millions upon millions each year. This constant problem has resulted in a plethora of academic literature and analysis. At the core of scholastic debate around this topic has been the issue of both the causes and preventability of starvation. Amartya Sen, one of the leading scholars in famine and food politics postulated that while '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'. He acknowledged that although the former may be caused by the latter, it is just one of many possible causes (Sen 1981:1). This paper will explore these 'possible causes' in a bid to assert that famine should not and cannot be seen simply in terms of a lack of food.

The literature on starvation roughly falls into the categories of 'nature-focused' and 'society-focused' approaches. While the environmentalist fatalism within the notion of there 'not being enough to eat' is heavily engrained within the paradigm of the former, the various other socio-political causes attributed to food shortage lie within the realm of the latter (Sen 1983:91). Though there is no obvious cleavage between these two focuses, it has been scholastically corroborated that the academic landscape has been dominated by the nature-centred paradigm, although this has begun to shift in more recent decades (Bush 1996:190). Notwithstanding the merits of nature-focused critiques, the over-privileging of the natural focus on starvation has had damaging implications and has marginalised crucial socio-political aspects of the issue (Sen 1983:91-6). A holistic understanding of these socio-political causes requires both historical contextualisation and an examination of internal and external dimensions of famine and starvation.

In order to highlight the need for an added emphasis on the society-based approach to starvation, the implications and consequences of the nature-centred focus in academic literature must be explored. Published in 1798, Robert Malthus's essay on the Principle of Population has been key to the nature-focused paradigm (Sen 1983:92). Malthus essentially saw the issue of food as one of supply and demand, and starvation as simply nature keeping overpopulation in check, conveying brutal overtones of food competition within the human species (Hodges 2005:2). Cynical about humanity's capabilities to increase its food production, Malthus (1798:31) expressed starvation as inevitable and 'beyond the power of man' to control. This attitude is described by Sen (1983:91) as Malthusian Pessimism. Sen also condemns it as 'fundamentally misconceived', as leaps in technological progress have since resulted in an enormous expansion of food production. The worldwide 'food per head' has, in fact, been increasing and there is more than enough to feed the global population (Sen 1983:93). This surplus, however, has led to what Sen terms 'Malthusian Optimism'. He explains that Malthusian logic – centred around the concept of food availability – does not recognise most famine landscapes, as many major famines have occurred amidst high food availability. This form of Malthusian optimism, Sen posits, 'has literally killed millions' (Sen 1983:95). The focus on starvation must therefore be shifted to factors other than simple food availability.

In his critique of Malthusianism and the natured-focused approach to famine, Sen coined the 'entitlement approach' (Sen 1983). This approach is best explained through the relationship of the 'endowment set' and the 'entitlement set'. The endowment set is the combination of an individual's total legally owned assets, these may be tangible assets, such as equipment, animals and land or intangible assets such as skills and knowledge, labour power or the membership of a particular community (Nayak 2000). The entitlement set is the set of all possible combinations of goods and services than individuals can obtain legally using the resources of their endowment set (Nayak 2000). Sen (1983:95) therefore asserts that starvation, being the inability to establish entitlement to food, is either the result of the collapse of one's endowment set or 'ownership bundle' or because of a breakdown of the means to use one's

endowment set to obtain an entitlement set. He concludes that famine must be approached with respect to these entitlement-based causes (Sen 1983:103). Sen's approach has received an array of criticism (Osmani 1993:2), however, it has been contended that much of this criticism has been based on the misapprehension of his intentions and that rather than attempting to debunk nature-focused hypotheses, Sen was simply trying to champion a change in the global approach to famine (Osmani 1993:47). Scholar Ben Fine vindicated the value of this approach, however, he cautioned that, due to the variety of indirect social causes to famine, it is 'primarily suited to investigative rather than causal analysis' (Fine 2002:617).

Just as the amount of food per head cannot be viewed as an accurate determinant of famine, the economic status of a group is not necessarily an accurate reflection of its susceptibility to starvation. Although famine may cause a division between the rich and poor, it also causes lines of division between different groups of the poor (Sen 1983:98). One of Sen's major case studies in his Food Problem (1983) essay, the Bengali Famine of 1943, clearly illustrates this phenomenon. The rural-wage labourer group was hit the hardest by the famine, while share-croppers and peasants, who held only a slight greater economic position, were largely spared from the effects of the famine-induced rise in food prices. This was simply due to the fact that they usually received their pay in foodgrains. The Bengali outcome validates Sen's championing of entitlement, as despite the availability of food and the endowment set of the rural-wage workers, the dysfunctional relationship between their endowments and their entitlements resulted in mass starvation. Just as importantly, however, it highlights the fact that different groups are affected by famines in a multitude of different ways and to varying degrees. The ways in which different groups have dealt with (and even profited from) famine have been labeled 'coping mechanisms' and 'livelihood strategies' (Swift 1993:14). Examples of these, such as barter, asset sales and loans generate winners and losers (Bush 1996:169). And while the strategies of 'winners' receives much attention, Duffield noted that the coping strategy of losers 'can become an important factor in the continued survival of more fortunate groups' (Duffield 1994:52). The trade and asset transfer in famine between different groups, he suggested, was also 'part of the process of active underdevelopment' (Duffield 1994:52).

Although famine's effects on different low social groups can vary widely, the net result is that it vastly widens the gap between the rich and the poor (Bennett 1987:7). This is because despite swollen prices, there is usually plenty of food nearby that the rich can afford (Bennett 1987:7). In most Third World countries, the nation is run by a disproportionate group of élites (George 1976:69) or the 'thin upper crust' whose power is reinforced by relations with powerful external patrons (Dube 1988:43). In South America, for example 17 percent of the land owners control 90 percent of the land and in Africa, three quarters of the people have access to about four percent of the land (George 1976:35). The relationship between this form of human agency and starvation is typified by the fact that 'there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy'(Sen 1999:178).

Abjectly, in the past famine has been used by dominant classes as a political tool to reinforce their subjugation of the majority or as a weapon against internal opposition (Marcus 2003:245). Modern history is littered with examples of such atrocity. The 'natural disaster' of the 1983-5 Ethiopian famine most ferociously struck regions of the nation that harboured anti-government movements. The Ethiopian foreign minister, in fact, revealed to an American diplomat that 'food … [was] … a major element in … [their] …strategy against the secessionists' (Marcus 2003:245). While exporting large quantities of grain to further its 'revolutionary' objectives in 1932, the Soviet Union imposed calamitous grain quotas on the Ukraine, letting at least five million of its own citizens 'literally collapse in the streets' (Marcus 2003:245). The investigation of David Keen has also shed light on the intentional nature of the Sudanese famine in the 1980's, which was employed to solidify and improve the status of the ruling class (Bush 1996:172). Even presently, North Korea still starves its own people and hampers food aid attempts (Marcus 2003:256). Unfortunately, the modern backdrop in which these politicized famines have occurrred is characterised by the costly nature of war (Jonassohn & Bjornson 1998:33). Famine provides a low-technology and low-cost form of control for even the most underdeveloped states. As scholar and professor David Marcus suggests, famine 'is a cheap weapon of mass murder' (Marcus 2003:252).

Despite efforts from the modern international community to counter starvation, there is a strong historical case that internationalism and modernity are just as much the poison as they are the cure (George 1976:53 and Patel 2007:75). An instance of this impression is provided by an 1878 study published by the prestigious Journal of the

Statistical Society. It found that in the 120 years of British rule in India, thirty-one 'serious famines' had occurred, whereas in the entire previous two millennia, only seventeen famines of this nature had been recorded (Patel and Delwiche 2002). Accredited scholar Mike Davis attributed the unprecedented levels of starvation to the British removing traditional supports that existed for times of crisis, whilst simultaneously integrating the Indian food system with the world economy. British modernization was directly to blame, as 'millions died, not outside the `modern world system,' but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of Liberal Capitalism' (Davis 2001:9).

The effects of this form of postcolonial conscription are apparent throughout the Third World. A common characteristic of colonial rule is the creation of 'export monocultures' in which nations become conditioned to mass-produce a certain commodity (McMichael 2012:32), which in many cases is a form of food or crop. The infrastructural damage this trade specialisation causes post-colonial nations has been determined by various academics to be a root cause of their present economic and social concerns, thus directly contributing the aforementioned lack of entitlement in famine-stricken societies. This post-colonial dynamic gives significant credence to the much maligned irony of famine that the producers of food are often the first victims of starvation (Bush 1996:169). The supply of the Third World and the demand of the First create a global trade co-dependency and while it may be argued that the consequent trade and interdependence can lead to growth, it can be and has been easily transformed into subordination (Dube 1988:6). This subordination is usually imposed by First World actors elevating and supporting a group of élites (Dube 1988:43), which links back to the previously discussed internal political causes of famine. Susan George commented that any uprising against these elites by the people is most likely to be vilified by the US as 'Communist' (George 1976:77).

There has been a mix of both criticism and praise for different aspects of the international community and their associations with famine. Exercising a large influence over Third World food politics, international organisations such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank are always central to academic debate (Paarlberg 2010:177). The viewpoint has been espoused that organisations such as these are simply the First World's apparatus for reinforcing international inequality (McMichael 1999 and Dube 1988). There have been a number of instances where this type of oppression has been manifest, one example being the international response to the Lagos Plan of Action (Patel and Delwiche 2002). Heeding the dangers of Western modernisation seen in British India, the first generation of African governments expressed their desire for a disconnection with the world market in order to build infrastructure and reduce debt. The World Bank, however, disagreed with these sentiments in its Berg Report and pressured the continent further into international dependency (Patel and Delwiche 2002). Nation-states are also responsible for these forms of pressure. While they subsidise their own domestic producers, rich members of the WTO pressure developing countries to open their markets (Oxfam International 2002:1). Haiti, for example, succumbed to this relentless pressure from both the US and the IMF and is now one of the most open economies in the world. However, malnutrition in Haiti has increased markedly while US rice producers have emerged as majors winner from the situation (Oxfam International 2002:1). Despite considerable condemnation, advocates of globalisation have nevertheless praised the performance of these international organisations in a difficult world, particularly the WTO, which has been described to be facilitating a new 'world of mutual respect, rights, and freedoms' (Moore 2005:12). Their developmental and humanitarian aid has also received praise from the broader international community (Moore 2005:13).

The political motives of first world aid have always been thoroughly scrutinised. Food aid particularly, has been considered by numerous scholars to be another form of reinforcement of the global system – simply 'chicken feeding' (Bush 1996:195) the Third World in a bid to continue their dependency. The post-World War Two policies of the US particularly have been argued to have directly contributed to the current dependence of Third World nations (Friedmann 1982:S248). While food aid may provide a 'band-aid' solution, it has been criticised, as it fails to engage with the socio-political roots of famine. In terms of the entitlement approach, giving away food doesn't re-establish a stable relationship between endowments and entitlements. Furthermore, food aid may be hijacked and manipulated by the ruling social class and used to further reinforce state hegemony (George 1976:209). Sen has encouraged the idea of 'food-for-work' programs, as benefit the society and are not easily exploited (Sen 1983:101). Other academics (Hodges 2005:94 and Oxfam International 2002:27) too have endorsed food aid in this regard.

Robert Malthus's belief that famine and starvation were 'beyond the power of man to control' epitomises the outdated and narrow-minded approach of a primarily nature-centred approach to the issue. While their natural aspects and influences shouldn't be disregarded, famine and starvation must be viewed as a breakdown in social and political systems. Investigations in this context should include both the internal and external socio-political structures surrounding the issue and incorporate a historical perspective. Although there may be no blanket solution to the problem, a better global understanding of the underlying society-based causes of famine will pave the way for future preventative measures. In order for any progress to be made, the global community must shift its focus from food's availability to its distribution.

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