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**Working Paper**

## Introduction to special issue of food and foodways

Centre for Economic Research Working Paper Series, No. WP04/09

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

UCD School of Economics, University College Dublin (UCD)

*Suggested Citation:* Ó Gráda, Cormac (2004) : Introduction to special issue of food and foodways, Centre for Economic Research Working Paper Series, No. WP04/09, University College Dublin, Department of Economics, Dublin, <https://hdl.handle.net/10197/940>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/72355>

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*CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC RESEARCH*

*WORKING PAPER SERIES*

*2004*

**Introduction to Special Issue of *Food and Foodways***

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WP04/09

May 2004

**DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN  
BELFIELD DUBLIN 4**

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup> TO SPECIAL ISSUE OF *FOOD & FOODWAYS*

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of three of the papers featured in this issue of *Food & Foodways* were presented at the conference on 'Famine: interdisciplinary perspectives from the past and the present', held at Les Treilles, 22-28<sup>th</sup> May 2003. The organizers are grateful to the Fondation des Treilles for hosting the conference and to the European Science Foundation for helping to fund it. I thank Chris Friedrichs, Karl Gunnar Persson, and Martin Bruegel for comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

Famines are, and have always been, a hallmark of economic backwardness. Europe and the rest of today's developed world have been spared major famine in peacetime since the 1860s, and there have been no major 'death-dealing' famines in Great Britain since the 1690s. The correlation between underdevelopment and famine is by no means perfect, however. Even though the world was a much richer place in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, famines nonetheless caused an estimated seventy million excess deaths in the past century (Devereux 2000).

Two of the four famines described in the articles that follow highlight how twentieth-century famines differ from those of earlier centuries. In earlier centuries famines were usually associated with serious harvest shortfalls, with what Cornelius Walford over a century ago dubbed 'natural causes' (Walford 1879: 20). Even economies which were resilient enough to withstand a single harvest shortfall were rarely able to withstand back-to-back harvest failures (as in Ireland in the late 1840s and France in the 1690s). Political factors, and in particular civil unrest and warfare, might exacerbate the damage wrought by a poor harvest. During the twentieth century the relative importance of political factors<sup>2</sup> – 'artificial causes or those within human control' (Walford 1879: 21) -- and food availability *tout court* was reversed: Mars in his various guises accounts for more famines today than Malthus. Most of the twentieth century's major famines (e.g. those in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, in Bengal

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<sup>2</sup> Walford's distinction simplifies, of course, since human actions today (through over-utilization of the soil, deforestation, and so on) can increase the likelihood of famine from 'natural causes' in the future.

in the early 1940s, in China in the late 1950s, Ethiopia in the 1980s) would have been less murderous, if not entirely avoidable, under more auspicious political circumstances (compare de Waal 1991; 1997).

Of course, many earlier famines were exacerbated by the economic dislocation caused by civil unrest and warfare (as in Ireland in the 1580s and 1650s, in France in the 1690s, in Matabeleland in the 1890s, or the in Soviet Union in the wake of the October Revolution). Other factors may exert an additional influence the severity of famines. These include the quality of what Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze dub 'public action', i.e. the action taken by the civil authorities. Human agency, by influencing how resources devoted to relief are allocated, plays a role too. Thus in Qing China, the venal and rapacious character of village chiefs was taken as given by the central government; for a relief effort to have any hope of success, the central bureaucracy needed to bypass that at local level (Will 1990: 94-7, 120-1). In seventeenth-century India Mughal rulers allocated considerable sums for famine relief but 'the benefit of these grants was generally reaped by corrupt and unscrupulous state officials' (Kaw 1996: 64). In Bangladesh in the 1970s the ration system was 'rife with corruption'; urban populations were privileged at the expense of the rural masses' (Hartmann and Boyce 1987: 46). It bears noting that although public action and human agency certainly matter, they too are to a degree a function of the economic backwardness that makes famine more likely.

Although economist Thomas Malthus denied the right of the hungry citizen to subsistence, rulers have long explicitly acknowledged a responsibility

to help. Some, influenced by the teachings of Christianity, Confucianism, and other ethical traditions, did so out of conviction. Some, no doubt, did so out of self-interest. They acted to prevent the spread of infectious diseases which failed to discriminate between the governing elite and the masses. Moreover, they knew that mass hunger, in its early stages at least, might generate civil unrest (e.g. Eiriksson 1996; Jordon 2004): *c'est à la boulangerie que commencent les révolutions*. Democracy and a free press – though rarely present in famine-threatened environments – also place pressure on elites to act. On the other hand, in Ireland and in the Netherlands in the 1840s Malthusian dogma constrained both private charity and the public purse. A providentialist version of Malthusianism saw famine as a divine plan to alleviate overpopulation; a more secular version warned against the knock-on impact of overgenerous relief on the economy at large (Gray 1997; Ó Gráda 1999).

Over the centuries governing elites have employed a variety of famine relief strategies: the maintenance of public granaries, institutionalised care through poor laws, improvised soup kitchens, workfare, subsidized migration schemes. Elites often relied on local agents (the clergy, NGOs, local leaders) to identify and relieve the neediest, but delegating responsibilities gives rise to principal-agent problems in the guise of corruption and red tape in the most affected regions. Some of the historical controversies about the optimal form of famine relief – such as the choice between public works or soup kitchens, or between centralized or decentralized bureaucracies – have a distinctly modern ring to

them (Brennan 1984; Ó Gráda and O'Rourke 1996; de Waal 1997; Drèze and Sen 1989; Hall-Matthews 1999; Waldman 2001; Toole *et al.* 1988).

### *MARKETS AND FAMINES*

The German writer Bertolt Brecht once sardonically remarked that 'famines do not simply occur: they are organized by the grain trade'. The implied contrast with Adam Smith's paean to the corn merchant in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) as the 'helmsman' whose self-interest minimized the damage done by a harvest shortfall, is stark. The performance of food markets in time of famine or threatened famine has been the subject of a good deal of research in recent years (e.g. Rashid 1981; Sen 1981; Maxon 2000; Ravallion 1997; von Braun, Teklu, and Webb 1997; Ó Gráda 1999; Ó Gráda and Chevet 2002). Research on twentieth-century famines in Bengal in 1942-3, Bangladesh in 1974, and sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that markets worked poorly in those instances, in the double sense that there was 'excessive' hoarding on the part of producers and traders, and inadequate interregional arbitrage (Sen 1981; Ravallion 1997; von Braun, Teklu, and Webb 1997; Maxon 2000). However, research into a series of famines in pre-industrial Europe – France in the 1690s and 1700s, Ireland in the 1840s, Finland in the 1860s – suggests that markets worked no less smoothly than in normal times (Ó Gráda 1999, 2001a; Ó Gráda and Chevet 2002). That is not to say that they worked like clockwork – far from it – but merely that their responses to

disequilibria, spatial and intertemporal, were no slower than in non-crisis times. Not that integrated markets always benefit the poor: it is easy to imagine how they might allow inhabitants of less-affected areas, armed with the requisite purchasing power, to attract food away from famine-threatened areas. Well-functioning commodity markets are a mixed blessing when the distribution of income moves against the poor, as highlighted in a classic contribution by Amartya Sen (Sen 1981; see too Sen 1995). Much depends on the extent to which such exports are used to finance cheaper imported substitutes (e.g. Indian maize for wheat), and on the speed with which food markets adjust. Generalizations are not warranted: these issues call for further research.

Free markets may mitigate the impact of famines in two other respects. First, freer markets for labor arguably limit the damage wrought by poor harvests; those who migrate to less-affected areas reduce the pressure on scarce food and medical resources where the crisis is deepest. It seems safe to assume that if the poor of the twentieth-century Third World had the same freedom to migrate in times of crisis (in the sense of the legal competence to migrate to famine-free areas) as the Irish in the mid-nineteenth, fewer of them would have succumbed (Ó Gráda and O'Rourke 1997). Second, there is the point emphasized by the French *économistes* of the eighteenth century: the regional specialization that follows free trade increases aggregate product, and therefore lessens the risks from any proportionate harvest shortfall.

In the instances mentioned above, food markets were not subject to



drastic governmental interference. In twentieth-century Western Europe, however, where famine was an exclusively wartime phenomenon, price controls and rationing were the norm. Black markets followed, almost as inevitably as night follows day. Whether such markets exacerbated or mitigated crises is unclear. A black market in ration cards (which entitled people to various food items, including some they may not have wanted) may well have increased welfare.<sup>3</sup> And insofar as the evasion of price controls encouraged farmers to increase agricultural output, the impact of black markets may also have been benign. However, the same may not apply to illegal trades in foods which should have been ceded to the authorities for redistribution to those at most risk. Violetta Hionidou's contribution in this issue describes a little-known famine in occupied Greece in 1941-44. The crisis followed the naval blockade imposed by the allies in the wake of Greece's occupations by the Italians and the Nazis in April 1941. A food scarcity quickly ensued, and assumed crisis proportions within months (see too Hionidou 1995, 2002). Hionidou's main focus here is on the operation of food markets, and in particular black markets. She exploits an unusual blend of archival sources, statistics, and interviews conducted with famine survivors on the islands of Syros, Hios and Mykonos. In Greece price controls were nothing new in times of food shortage; their introduction even before the German invasion led to panic purchasing and hoarding, and the rationing of foodstuffs from 1941 on led to intensified black market activity. Short-term price movements on the black market were very

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, this does not mean that issuing entitlements to subsistence by means of ration cards is a bad idea.

sensitive to rumours about the war's progress. The regional variation in prices also rose sharply, a sign that the various black markets were far from integrated. The effectiveness of the markets was hampered by rampant hyperinflation. The authorities sometimes took drastic action against the black marketeers, including public executions, but in vain. Hionidou's contribution highlights the pervasive and all-embracing character of these markets: for most of those involved (apart from a few major operators) they were a means of survival.

#### FAMINE IN THE SOVIET UNION

'Political famines' are nothing new. The poet Edmund Spenser (1552-99) was describing an age-old tactic when, referring to the Desmond Wars in Ireland, he advised that 'great force must be the instrument but famine must be the means for till Ireland be famished it cannot be subdued' (cited in Maud Ellmann 1993: 11). However, a disproportionate number of twentieth-century famines have been 'political famines'. In other words they were more the outcome of political factors than classic food availability declines per se. Stephen Wheatcroft's contribution describes a famine (or famines) circumscribed by the lack of free markets, controls on the movement of people, a rejection of foreign aid, an unfree press, a dogmatic prioritisation of long-term goals over present-day needs, and the pervasive fear instilled by the sheer brutality of Josef Stalin: any of these factors alone could have exacerbated a

crisis.<sup>4</sup> This is the latest in a long line of papers by Wheatcroft, perhaps the world's foremost expert on Soviet famines (see too Wheatcroft 1983, 1993; Davies and Wheatcroft 2004). While Wheatcroft has never excluded the influence of political factors, he denies that the Soviet leadership 'wanted a famine' in the early 1930s or that the Ukrainian famine was 'deliberately inflicted for its own sake'.<sup>5</sup> He blames the authorities instead for their ruthless and wrong-headed determination to pursue industrialisation at breakneck speed. But he also factors in the part played by poor weather in 1931 (drought) and 1932 (hot weather followed by heavy rainfall).

The Soviet famine (or famines, since those in the south and in Kazakhstan were distinct) described by Wheatcroft produced an excess mortality of nearly six million (Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 412-5; compare Adamets 2002). Inevitably, catastrophes on that scale give rise to anti-social behaviour and the attenuation of civil society. As elsewhere in famine situations, in the Soviet Union the very young and the very old suffered most. Their marginalization stemmed from their inability to 'fight' for access to food.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On China in the 1950s compare Lin 1990; Riskin 1998. For a forceful case that capitalism can also wreak havoc see Davis 2001. Also relevant are Garenne *et al.* 2002 (describing the consequences of a forced liberalization of markets in the absence of safety nets in Madagascar in the 1980s); Siura and Swift 2002 (on the benefits of state planning in Mongolia in the 1990s).

<sup>5</sup> The quotations are from Robert Conquest as cited in Davies and Wheatcroft (2004: 441).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the same does not seem to apply to women. There is considerable evidence that, relatively speaking, women cope better with famine than men. On this see especially Hionidou 2002: 195-7; Macintyre 2002.

But the Soviet famine of 1931-3 provides hard evidence of something much more sinister: instances of cannibalism, both in the more restricted sense of the flesh of unfortunates who had succumbed being eaten by survivors and in the sense of victims being murdered for consumption. The Soviet famine of the early 1920s and the Leningrad blockade of 1941-2 also yield evidence of cannibalism (Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 421-4; Patenaude 2002; *The Guardian*, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2001). Such evidence would not have surprised Malthus, who believed cannibalism that 'must have had its origin in extreme want, though the custom might afterwards be continued from other motives'. Yet how widespread was cannibalism during famines remains an unresolved and controversial issue for historians, for archaeologists, and for anthropologists.

Two other highly-publicized events lend credence to claims of cannibalism *in extremis*. The first comes from the U.S. and relates to the Donner Party, a group of California-bound migrants who attempted to travel west during the winter of 1846-7. Some members of this group were almost certainly reduced to cannibalizing the remains of others who had already succumbed to hunger when stranded in the Sierra Nevada. The second relates to survivors of an air crash in the Andes in October 1972; they too ate the dead in order to live (Read 1974). Yet hard evidence of survivor cannibalism during famines remains scarce. In Ireland in the 1840s there were unsubstantiated rumours (e.g. *The Times*, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1849), and in the 1580s further reports that 'one did eat another from hunger'. In his study of Great North European

Famine of the 1310s, William Jordan sides with those who deem many accounts of cannibalism a 'literary trope' employed to make narrative accounts of famine 'real' (Jordan 1996: 149-50), but others (e.g. Marlar *et al.* 2000; Diamond 2000) deem famine cannibalism to have been more widespread than modern Western cultural sensibilities can readily grasp. It bears noting, however, that in India the widespread famines of the nineteenth century do not seem to have been accompanied by cannibalism.

In demographic terms, the Soviet famine of 1931-3 may have marked a transition from traditional pattern insofar as the main causes of death were concerned. There was a big rise in recorded cases of typhus and typhoid fever, but the proportion of all deaths due to infectious diseases was lower in 1933 (the first year in which the data were recorded) than in the immediate wake of the crisis in 1934 (Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 430-1; Adamets 2002: 171-2). The blockade-induced famine in Leningrad a decade later is also interesting in this respect. There the authorities managed somehow to keep the city free of infectious disease, though excess mortality from literal hunger was enormous. Patriotic zeal was a factor; so undoubtedly were repression and compulsion. The numbers dying of typhoid fever, typhus, and dysentery -- the classic famine diseases in temperate climates -- were fewer in December 1941, at the height of the crisis, than in December 1940, before the blockade began.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pavlov (1965: 124), based on a report dated January 5<sup>th</sup> 1942 of the Leningrad Health Service.

According to Dimitri Pavlov, who lived in the city during the blockade (Pavlov 1965: 124-5):

How is the absence of epidemics to be explained, given conditions of acute hunger, shortage of hot water, lack of protection from cold weather, and physical weakness? Leningrad's experience proves that hunger need not be accompanied by the inseparable fellow travelers, infectious disease and epidemics. A good system of sanitation breaks down their comradeship, for not only during the winter months of 1941 but in the spring of 1942, when conditions were most favorable for outbreaks of disease, no epidemics occurred in Leningrad. The government set the people to cleaning streets, yards, staircases, garrets, cellars, sewer wells – in brief, all the breeding grounds where infectious disease might start. From the end of March to the middle of April, 300,000 persons worked daily cleaning up the city. Inspections of living quarters and compulsory observance of rules for cleanliness prevented the spread of communicable disease. The inhabitants were starving. Nonetheless, they fulfilled to their last days the social obligations necessary in a crowded community.

The contrast with previous famines is indeed a striking one. The success of the Leningrad authorities in keeping infectious diseases under control was replicated, though on a much smaller scale, in the Warsaw Ghetto, in western Holland during the 'hunger winter' of 1944-5, and in Axis-occupied Greece (Ó Gráda 1999: 99-101). However, in sub-Saharan Africa infectious diseases are still endemic in non-crisis years, and therefore increase the death toll from famines (Salama *et al.* 2001; Waldman 2001). Amartya Sen suggested long ago that modern famines are rarely the product of food availability declines (Sen 1981); the ready availability – at a price, of course – of the medical technology to prevent and treat infectious disease such as typhus and dysentery compounds the anachronistic character of present-day famine.

## *FAMINE AND MEMORY*

Lin Poyer's contribution offers a vivid depiction of famine conditions in 1944-45 on the Micronesian atoll of Chuuk. Her account is based largely on the memories of elderly resident survivors, whose stories of substitute foods, intra-family tensions, theft, and ingenuity in adversity highlight the power of oral history to retrieve anecdotes and impressions of famine often undocumented in conventional sources (compare Vaughan 1989; Ó Ciosáin 2000; Ó Gráda 2001b). At their best, not only do such stories offer new representations of the past, but they enrich our reading of the written record. The pitfalls of oral history also need bearing in mind: autobiographical memories tend to be self-serving, they are rarely free of contamination by extraneous data, and they can be subject to chronological confusion. Yet even the silences can be revealing. For example, the resilience of Chuuk's rural economy is implicit in these stories; excess mortality was light, even though the island had to sustain a population four times the norm in the face of blockade and nightly bombardments. Clearly it had the capacity to increase and diversify food output considerably at very short notice. And the impression gained of the Japanese presence on Chuuk is relatively benign: this, after all, was not Burma or Thailand. There is evidence of requisitioning of food and land on the part of the Japanese military, but it is telling that the hearsay reports of cannibalism refer to the Japanese troops, not to the indigenous

population. Again, the oral record is silent on infectious diseases, which might have been expected to accompany any significant excess mortality.

### *THE 1840s IN EUROPE*

The Great Irish Famine of the 1840s was a major famine by world-historical standards. It killed a higher proportion of the population – about one-eighth -- than most famines. It occurred in an era when Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, then the most industrialised polity on the globe. At the same time, it bears noting that real GDP per head in the United Kingdom then was roughly that of, say, Egypt today. Though Ireland's problems were not replicated anywhere else in the 1840s, these were years of economic crisis and political unrest throughout Europe. Not only did *phythoptera infestans* strike everywhere potatoes were grown (Bourke 1993; Bourke and Lamb 1993; Ó Gráda 1999): grain harvests were also poor almost everywhere in 1846. Pockets of Belgian Flanders and Germany suffered significant excess mortality, and there was widespread privation elsewhere (Jacquemyns 1929; Mokyr 1981; Solar 1997; Ó Gráda, Paping, and Vanhoute, forthcoming).

In Belgium and Ireland the failure of the potato sparked off the crisis; elsewhere a poor wheat harvest and the consequent rise in grain prices were the main problems. In bread-eating France, the focus was on the corn harvest. In the final article in this issue, Jean-Michel Chevet and I analyze the impact of the crisis on France. We begin with a review of a topic that has generated a



substantial debate in French historiography, viz. the supposed link between corn prices and excess mortality in France. That debate has involved such luminaries as Jean Meuvret (1946) and Ernest Labrousse (1970). We argue that, whatever about the strength of the link in earlier times, it had attenuated to nothing by the mid-1840s. Our analysis relies on data describing agricultural output, prices, and population at both national and *département* level. We show that the significant rise in grain prices in 1846 failed to provoke a significant rise in mortality in that year or in the next. Nor was there any correlation across the hexagon between grain price rises or harvest shortfalls, on the one hand, and mortality, on the other. Chevet and I also draw attention to the role of substitute crops in certain regions (e.g. maize and buckwheat), and to the importance of imports in staving off a classic famine. This is a reminder against focusing exclusively on the wheat harvest: substitution between crops and between home and foreign production alleviated deficits to a much greater extent than was possible in Ireland or in Belgian Flanders. In this sense markets worked well. This is also suggested by the lack of correlation between wheat price and harvest shortfall across the hexagon. Moreover, because in France the potato did not bulk as large in the diet of the poor, and because the impact of *phytophthora infestans* on yields was less, it did not play the same catastrophic role there that it played in Ireland.

We readily accept that there was hardship in France; to make matters worse, the high prices of 1846 were followed by a fall in industrial output in the

following year. Fear of famine, yes; a crisis averted by substitute foods and imports, maybe; but excess mortality, no.

## CONCLUSION

In the present century, perhaps for the first time in history, only pockets of the globe, such as parts of Africa, Afghanistan, and North Korea, remain truly vulnerable to the threat of famine. For all the media publicity attending modern famines (valuable from a humanitarian standpoint), their demographic impacts nowadays tend to be minor (Seaman 1993). Nonetheless, although there is little danger of population outstripping the capacity of the globe to produce food in the next generation or two, it would be naïve to rule out more 'political' famines in the future (Dyson and Ó Gráda 2002; Devereux 2002). The lessons learned from the study of actual famines are therefore salutary.

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