

Mass Starvations and the Limitations of Famine Theorising

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1 Introduction

This article considers current definitions and conceptualisations of famine, and their limitations. It argues that many of the present ways of defining and theorising famine are trapped in a framework that regards famine as a failure to which scientific or technical solutions can be found. Such an approach, with its use of theoretical considerations of cause as a starting point, leads to technologised responses that are not only incapable of responding adequately to the politics of mass starvations but are themselves implicated in that politics. The article suggests an alternative way of thinking, where the important question is not 'What causes famine and what is the appropriate response if famine is to be avoided?' but 'How were acts of mass starvation committed and by whom, and how can those responsible be brought to justice?' In this view, mass starvation is seen as a crime against humanity. The language of genocide (perpetrators, victims, bystanders) replaces that of famine (causes, victims, relief) and the issue becomes not what response there should be to famine, but where responsibility lies for producing it in the first place.

2 Conceptions of famine

There have been numerous attempts to establish what is meant by famine and to determine what its causes might be. The search for an adequate definition is seen by many writers to be an essential preliminary to both theoretical analyses and practical action. Donors cannot be motivated to act unless they are convinced that what is taking place is actually a famine. Analysts cannot begin to study the causes of famine until they know what it is they are looking at. And yet famine is elusive: it refuses to be pinned down by definitions.

In the Malthusian or neo-Malthusian view, famine is a question of the excess of population over the means of subsistence. It is an instance where population growth has outstripped food production. Massive starvation almost inevitably follows until the balance is restored. For others, famine is seen as a natural disaster that occurs when a failure of food production, through drought for example, leads to conditions of scarcity. The land can no longer support the population that relies upon it.

This view of famine as caused by a shortage of food was challenged by Amartya Sen. He argued that a decline in what he called 'food availability' was not necessary for a famine to occur. The total food supply per head in any area did not matter; what was crucial was whether particular individuals or households had access to sufficient food. In the famous opening words of *Poverty and Famines*, Sen argues: 'Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not *being* not enough food to eat' (Sen 1981: 1). Starvation according to Sen was not about food as a commodity, but about the relationship of people to that commodity. This was an important insight, as far as it went, and it brought academic theorising of famine back into the realm of social science, though as Amrita Rangasami (1985) was later to argue, it was an insight that was already incorporated in practice, in the Famine Codes of India, for example.

Sen's work, with its shift away from an emphasis on quantities of food to questions of entitlements, was an important move in three respects. First, it stressed the need to examine each famine in its own particularity. Sen claimed to present not a general theory of famine but a framework in which individual famines could be analysed. Second, it involved a move from the examination of overall 'populations' in the Malthusian mode to the study of specific 'persons' or households. Finally, and most importantly, it focused attention on relationships. In order to understand starvation it is necessary to look at the structure of ownership relations and other forms of entitlement relations within any particular society.

3 Technologised responses and their limitations

These moves within Sen's work were potentially very radical, and could have produced a new approach to famine studies. However, they did not, for two reasons. First, although Sen moved away from the notion of famine as a failure of food production, he retained the idea of breakdown or collapse, this time of a person's entitlements. Thus famines were still seen as failures, but 'entitlement failures' rather than failures of food supply. He did not consider the possibility that famines could be a *product* of the social or economic system rather than its *failure*.¹

When something is identified as a failure, whether of the natural or the economic system, it appears as a technical or managerial problem. An otherwise benign system has collapsed and needs putting right. The appropriate response is to try to identify what went wrong and then to intervene in some way to correct it. Expert knowledge of the system and how it works enables those versed in such technologies to apply their programmes unproblematically and provide solutions. So, for example, once Sen's notion of entitlements was accepted, plans could be put in place to replace lost entitlements. Instead of studying populations and food *per capita*, the experts in famine relief examine the individual household, its vulnerability and its coping strategies. These responses are depoliticised, technologised responses. Solutions are implemented by experts, without consultation with those involved. The victims are seen as just that – they have no political voice.

The second reason why the radical potential of Sen's approach was blunted is to be found in Sen's very limited view of what politics is. He sees politics as separable from economics and the state as ultimately benign and non-violent. He excludes two things from consideration in his entitlements approach: instances of deliberate starvation, and what he calls 'non-entitlement transfers'.² Both of these routinely occur during famines. In addition, Sen does not question the way in which the legitimate violence of the state can be used to uphold the ownership rights of certain sections of the community while others starve, although he does acknowledge that 'starvation deaths can reflect legality with a vengeance' (Sen 1981: 166). Sen's approach, 'which purports to provide a framework for understanding starvation and famines, excludes any adequate understanding of precisely those conditions that obtain *whenever there is a famine* – the denial of access to food by *force* employed on behalf of those who possess food' (Edkins 2000: 59).

The distinction being made here between technologised, managerial responses and fully politicised responses needs to be clarified. It is not the same as the distinction often made between practitioners on the one hand and academics on the other, nor is it a question of responses that attend to the symptoms not the causes. A

technologised response, in the use of the term here, is a response that claims to rely on a theoretical framework and a set of rules, practices or techniques derived from it. The theory is deemed to be applicable in a series of different historical and geographical locations. In this view, the job of the practitioner is to become an expert in the various theories and their application. The expert is accepted as politically neutral.

A fully politicised response recognises that there is no one theory that will apply everywhere, and that in any case first, theoretical analyses already embody political assumptions and second, the application of general rules to particular cases is not straightforward. Practitioners, however well versed in theoretical studies, and however comprehensive the procedure manual they carry, always in the end have to make judgements. They have to decide what is to be done in the particular situation in which they find themselves. Their decision will always be political; it will have consequences for power relations. As such, it embodies responsibility. To hide behind a claim to expert status is to deny that responsibility.

4 Repoliticising mass starvations

One of the reasons Sen's entitlement approach falls into the same trap as theories of famine as natural disaster and leads to technologised responses is that he retained a definition of famine which, like other definitions current in the mid-1980s, focused on demographic and biological factors and saw famine as a breakdown. His definition of famine was: 'A particularly virulent manifestation of starvation causing widespread death' (Sen 1981: 40).

Rangasami (1985) questions this definition on two grounds. First, she argues that mortality is not a necessary condition of famine but only its biological culmination. Famine should be seen as a protracted politico-social-economic process of oppression comprising three stages: dearth, famishment and mortality. The culmination of the process comes well before the final stage of disease and death. If the process is halted before people die, it is nonetheless still a famine. Second, famine cannot be defined solely with reference to the victims. The process is one in which 'benefits

accrue to one section of the community while losses flow to the other' (Rangasami 1985: 1748). To study only the responses or coping strategies of victims, while paying no attention to the actions (or inaction) of the rest of the community is to miss what is going on.

Since Rangasami's work, other writers, including Alex de Waal (1989), have developed the notion of famine as a process and examined the coping strategies that those suffering from famine employ at different stages. Only one writer – David Keen (1994) – has taken up directly the challenge of examining the strategies of the beneficiaries of famine: its perpetrators and its bystanders.³ In his study of famine in the Sudan, Keen poses the questions 'what use is famine, what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated?'⁴ (Keen 1994: 12).

Such questions are not easy ones for the academic community, particularly the development community, to ask. They involve moving away from an approach that is restricted to the level of cause. Asking for the 'cause' of famine makes mass starvation appear 'as a sort of disease or abscess...an obstacle to be removed, a dysfunctioning to be rectified' (Foucault 1980: 135). The question should rather be posed in a positive sense. It is necessary to ask who benefits from mass starvations, not just who the victims are. To do this reinstates mass starvation as a political process.

It is necessary to be clear how the term 'political' is being used here. A political process is one that involves relationships of power between people and between groups. And it is a process that involves decisioning and responsibility, rather than simply rule-following (Edkins 2000: 148–9). It is not a question of the realm of what is generally called 'politics' (political parties, elections or other struggles for state control), as distinct from economics or the social realm. Those distinctions are unhelpful. To treat mass starvations as political processes is to pay attention to them as processes that involve relationships between people (not just between persons and commodities, as in entitlements theory). Social relations are inevitably power relations. However, power is not centralised and possessed, but dispersed. Power relations are produced on a day-to-day basis through small-

scale actions and interactions of individual people. The best action to take in particular circumstances cannot be decided by experts or determined by manuals, though both may help. In the end it is a question of responsibility and judgement in arriving at decisions and acting.

To study mass starvations as political processes, is to examine how they come about, what small actions or inaction on the part of which people make them happen, and who exactly the beneficiaries and the victims are. It brings in questions of responsibility. It requires a detailed investigation, rather than a grand general theory. It means addressing minutiae or details. Raul Hilberg is a historian who adopts this approach in his work on the Nazi genocide. He says: 'In all my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers...I look at the process...as a series of minute steps' (Lanzmann 1995: 55).

It cannot be assumed that famine and mass starvation is something that the whole of the international community would fight against if only it knew how. To do so is to forget that, as Ranganami reminds us, many benefit in some way from famine and oppression. And it is to forget that even under the rule of law in democratic states, violence is present. David Keen (1994) and Mark Duffield (1993, 1994, 1998) have shown that there are numerous beneficiaries of the famines and mass starvations in the Horn of Africa, and they have acknowledged the violence inherent in so-called peaceful democratic states and international structures of dominance and oppression.

5 Attributing responsibility

If it is accepted that mass starvation is the result of a series of small acts, at least some of them deliberate and some carried out with the intention of producing what are called famines, or what I would like to call 'mass starvations', then it is necessary to begin to pay attention to the question of responsibility. Alex de Waal has used the phrase 'famine crimes' (de Waal 1997) and suggested that a possible solution would be 'anti-famine contracts' between rulers and people. If such a political contract is in place 'famine is a political scandal. Famine is *deterred*' (de Waal 1997: 5).

Such political contracts may seem to be more likely in democratic political regimes rather than authoritarian ones (de Waal 2000). However, it is important to avoid concluding that 'democracy prevents famine'. Such an inference risks reinstating a grand theory of famine. A return to theory requires definitions, abstractions and generalisations and leads once more to technical solutions. Grand theories take the politics out of the situation, replacing it with expert knowledge that pretends to objectivity. This is the case even when the theory concerned is a theory of politics. They play into the hands of those whose power is built on a culture of expertise and scientific objectivity. It is also important to avoid framing anti-famine contracts as simply measures against governments that fail to respond quickly enough to an emerging crisis: to say this would be to return promptly to the language of failure, breakdown and disaster. Although one may want to allocate responsibility for an inadequate response, this is merely a first stage. It is clearly the case, as Devereux (2000: 27) argues, that 'famines occur because they are not prevented: they are allowed to happen.' It is also unfortunately the case that famines occur because they are *made* to happen.

Once mass starvations are considered crimes and the parallels made with other crimes, like genocide or war crimes, two things happen. First, the vocabulary changes. When genocide is discussed, it is not so much a question of causes and solutions, but one of responsibility, criminal liability, perpetrators, bystanders, victims and survivors. Keen suggested that the question of famine should be phrased in a positive sense: 'what functions does famine have?' rather than the negative sense: 'what causes the failures that lead to famine?' Using the language of genocide, appropriate questions become: 'Who committed the famine?', 'How was it committed and why?', 'Who were the victims?', 'Who was involved (e.g. state, societal institutions, various people-ethnic groups, individuals with certain job roles/professions, bystanders, etc.)?'⁵ Or, substituting 'mass starvations' for 'famine': 'Who committed the mass starvation?' If mass starvation is a crime, the appropriate language should be used. Crimes don't happen, they are committed. Crime is not 'ended' but criminals deterred, detained and prosecuted.

The second consequence of mass starvation being considered a crime is that those who commit it are

prosecuted. This has not happened so far of course, but there are prospects that it may in the not too distant future, with the establishment of the International Criminal Court. The Rome Statute of the ICC was signed in 1998 and came into force in July 2002. During the discussions establishing the court there was a considerable expansion of the list of crimes against humanity. These crimes are no longer linked with warfare; they can take place in peacetime. Certain proposals did not have sufficient support to make the list: currently terrorism, economic embargo, and mass starvation do not appear (Schabas 2001: 38).

Despite this, the Rome Statute already explicitly includes mass starvation under three headings. It is a war crime if it is used as a weapon of war; a crime against humanity, if it is the deliberate extermination of a civilian population by the deprivation of food; and a genocide, if it is carried out with the intention of destroying in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. 'Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions' is defined as a war crime in Article 8. At present, this applies only when starvation takes place in international conflict: it is not yet included in the statute in respect of armed conflict not of an international character (Schabas 2001: 170). Article 7 of the Rome Statute defines 'extermination' as a crime against humanity 'when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population' where "extermination" includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, *inter alia* the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population' (Schabas 2001: 174). Genocide is defined in Article 6 and includes 'deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part' (Schabas 2001: 169). The term 'conditions of life' is further defined as including 'deliberate deprivation of resources indispensable for survival, such as food or medical services, or systematic expulsion from homes' (Schabas 2001: 250).

There is an obvious question that must be raised over the strategy being proposed here, which is one of criminalisation. It could be argued that

criminalisation is nothing but another form of depoliticisation.⁶ We put in place, quite literally, a rulebook, and alongside it a set of criteria for what counts as evidence. By naming famine as a 'crime', and defining what is to count as 'mass starvation' in a statute or in case law, are we not merely removing it once more from the realm of the political? Michel Foucault in particular saw the production of a criminal class as a form of depoliticisation. As a disciplinary practice, it functions to delineate a certain group of people and to label their acts as criminal, not political (Foucault 1991: 277). States have used legislation in this way to outlaw certain forms of protest and to reserve to themselves the monopoly of legitimate violence within a society.

What is proposed here is somewhat different, of course. First, in the case of the International Criminal Court, like the International Tribunals in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, the state is not in the same place as usual. The state is not necessarily on the side of the prosecutor, but in the dock with the accused. The tables have in a sense been turned and those not generally subject to the rule of law, those who have sovereignty, those who can declare a state of emergency and suspend the law, are the ones being made accountable. Second, in the courts it is recognised that what is taking place is a specific judgement or a decision. The evidence of what happened, precisely and in detail, must be investigated. The application of the law to a particular case is accepted as problematic.

However, the important point is that the distinction between a technical act and a political act is not a simple opposition. The aim of the critique offered here is not merely to argue for politicisation in the place of technologisation, but to point to the way in which what we call techniques, or experts, or theories, are already intensely political. There is a tension between technologisation and politicisation. It is not really possible to replace one with the other. Any repoliticisation can be assimilated and depoliticised once more. This is what has happened to successive attempts to repoliticise famine theory, from Sen's entitlement approach onwards. A radical repoliticisation has been followed by the incorporation of the new approach as nothing more than a new technology. And any technologisation remains at root a political move.

6 Conclusion

Any definition of famine that sees it as a failure of some sort is missing the point. Whether famine is seen as a failure of food supply, a breakdown in the food distribution system, or a multi-faceted livelihoods crisis, the outcome is the same. These definitions or concepts blind us to the fact that famines, and the deaths, migrations or impoverishments that they produce, are enormously beneficial to the perpetrators: they are a success not a failure, a normal output of the current economic and political system, not an aberration.

This article has suggested that it might be useful to replace the notion of famine. It has begun to substitute the phrase 'mass starvations' in an attempt to get away from the idea of scarcity as a cause and famines as a breakdown or failure. To talk of mass starvations is to evoke the parallel of mass killings and genocides. In many ways famines, though distinct from genocides, share more with these acts than they do with natural disasters. In many if not most cases, they are the result of deliberate actions by people who can see what the consequences of those actions will be. If they are not produced deliberately, then they are

often allowed to progress beyond the stage of 'famishment' to that of 'morbidity' through deliberate or negligent inaction on the part of those who could intervene to save lives and livelihoods.

There is already an embryonic provision in international law that allows for the prosecution of those responsible for mass starvations. Rather than assuming goodwill and unanimity in the project of 'Ending Famine in the 21st Century', it might be as well to consider campaigning to improve these provisions and to remove impunity from those who, nationally or internationally, commit famine crimes or the crime of mass starvation. This would take place alongside action to establish robust anti-starvation political contracts locally.

There is a need for a new language that talks of mass starvations, which, like mass killings, are regarded as a crime against humanity. Famines are not caused by abstractions – climate, food supply, entitlement failure, war – they are brought about through the acts or omissions of people or groups of people. These people are responsible for famine and mass starvation – and they should be held accountable.

Notes

1. 'Complex political emergency' approaches retain this idea that famines are unexpected 'emergencies' rather than a product of 'normal' social and political life.
2. Both where a person starves deliberately and where a person is deliberately starved. Non-entitlement transfers are those that fall outside the legal system of the society concerned.
3. Mark Duffield examines this question on a broader canvas as part of a system of global governance (Duffield 2001).
4. In framing these questions, Keen is drawing on Michel Foucault's remarks on the Soviet Gulag (Foucault 1980: 135).
5. These questions are taken from Totten *et al.* (1997: xxv) substituting 'famine' for 'genocide'.
6. The author is indebted to Haris Gazdar for drawing my attention to this point in discussion. In another context, that of international terrorism after September 11th, I have argued against criminalisation for precisely these reasons (Edkins 2002).

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