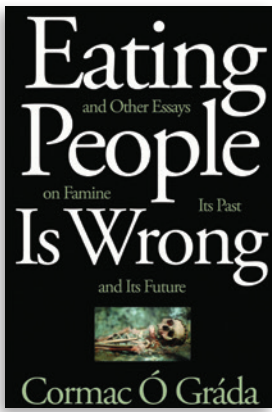


BOOK REVIEW

Food Fights



EATING PEOPLE IS WRONG, AND OTHER ESSAYS ON FAMINE, ITS PAST, AND ITS FUTURE

BY CORMAC Ó GRÁDA
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REVIEWED BY JESSIE ROMERO

The Third Horseman of the Apocalypse has visited every corner of the world. Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas — all have suffered the ravages of famine. Sometimes weather is to blame; 600,000 people starved to death in France in 1709-1710 following a winter so cold it became known as the “Great Frost.” Sometimes the culprit is war, as when the Germans blockaded Leningrad and residents resorted to eating leather and wallpaper paste (and, according to some accounts, each other). In *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future*, Cormac Ó Gráda, professor emeritus of economics at University College Dublin, explores the political, cultural, and economic forces that combine to create such crises.

In the title essay, Ó Gráda illustrates the “repulsiveness” of famines by broaching a gruesome topic: cannibalism. Ó Gráda finds that cannibalism, while rare, is more common in famines than previously believed. But in some cases, he says, reports of cannibalism are an attempt to demonize the “other” or achieve political ends. He describes some stories of cannibalism during famines in Ireland as colonialist discourse aimed at “indigenous savages.”

In an essay on the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-1944, which killed more than 2 million people, Ó Gráda re-examines the conclusions of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen on the famine’s causes. In an influential 1981 book, Sen blamed the famine not on an actual lack of food, but rather on large-scale speculation and hoarding that drove up prices. In contrast, Ó Gráda offers evidence of a substantial food shortage, precipitated by a poor rice harvest in 1942. For example, Indian officials conducted multiple food drives, which involved searching homes and businesses, but failed to turn up any hoarded food. In addition, the 1943 harvest was good, which should have prompted the release of hoarded supplies. But prices remained high in early 1944, arguing against the existence of large-scale hoarding.

Ó Gráda attributes the famine to British and Indian officials who repeatedly denied the problem and were unwilling to divert ships or food from the war effort. The problem in Bengal in 1943, he writes, was “the failure of the Imperial power to make good a harvest shortfall that would have been manageable in peacetime. ... The famine was the product of the wartime priorities of the ruling colonial elite.”

The role of markets in famines is a contentious issue. On the one hand is the classical view that markets both prevent and remedy famines; in *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote that all famines in Europe had been the result of “the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniences of a dearth.” On the other hand, a more populist tradition argues that markets exacerbate famines by diverting food away from the poor to the rich.

At the outset of the third essay in the book, it seems that Ó Gráda hopes to help resolve this debate by studying how markets functioned during four famines: France in 1693-1694 and 1709-1710, Finland in 1868, and Ireland in 1846-1852 (the Irish potato famine). In a technical section that most non-experts will likely find difficult to follow, he analyzes price data and concludes that, rather than markets helping or hurting, these four famines were the result of disastrous crop shortfalls and inadequate government assistance for the poor. But Ó Gráda does not go on to explain how these findings relate to a broader understanding of the role of markets in famines, leaving the promise of the essay unfulfilled.

The responsibility of government is a central theme in Ó Gráda’s chapter on the Great Leap Famine, which killed tens of millions of people in China between 1959 and 1961. Mao Zedong’s “Great Leap Forward,” an attempt to forcibly industrialize the country, hobbled agricultural production and left millions of people in the countryside without enough food.

Ó Gráda’s essay on the Great Leap Famine is mostly an analysis of three recent books on the famine, and as such lacks a clear conclusion. Still, he raises a number of interesting questions, including Mao’s culpability, the role of local officials, and — one of the biggest questions surrounding the famine — how many people actually died during it.

Determining an accurate excess mortality rate (the number of people who died beyond the natural death rate) has been complicated by poor record keeping and limited access to what records there are. As a result, Ó Gráda explains, estimates vary widely and often reflect political ideology. Modern supporters of Mao claim only 2 million to 3 million people died; critics contend as many as 60 million died. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle; demographers have estimated excess mortality of between 18 million and 32.5 million — still making the Great Leap famine the most deadly in history.

In recent decades, famines have become relatively rare and small by historical standards, the result of productivity increases in agriculture, improved communication and transportation networks, and numerous international aid agencies. Still, while extraordinary famines are on the wane, steady-state malnutrition remains a serious problem. As Ó Gráda warns, “‘making famine history’ is not the same thing as ‘making hunger history.’” **EF**