

What Causes Famines?

Recent events in Ethiopia have brought the question of famine back into the news. But what are famines? And what causes them? The obvious answer seems to be a situation where people are dying through lack of food in a particular region.

Were we living in a world where everyone had an automatic right to the amount of food they needed to stay alive this simple explanation might be plausible. The only way, in such circumstances, that a famine could arise would be if the total amount of food available to the people of a particular region fell below that needed to feed them all. The trouble with this simplistic explanation is that it is contradicted by the facts. First, there is the fact that during famines some starve while others have no problem obtaining food, whereas if the above explanation were true all people would suffer equally. Secondly, in a number of famines not only has the amount of food available in the region not fallen, or not fallen substantially, but food has even been exported.

These two examples show that a famine is not just a question of the total amount of food available in relation to the total number of people in a particular region; it is more complicated than this. People's access to food (as to other goods) is not free, but depends on a number of economic, social and legal factors defining their position in society.

In a developed capitalist country like Britain access to food depends almost exclusively on having money. People get this money in a number of ways: from owning property (as a non-work income such as rent, interest and profit), from trading or from selling some service, from selling their mental and physical energies (for a wage or salary), and from the state (as pensions and other allowances). So people get money which then gives them a claim on food, of a quantity and quality related to the amount of money they have. This claim is basically a property claim in that the exchange of money for food is a property-transaction involving an exchange of equivalent values.

In undeveloped countries like Ethiopia or Bangladesh the situation is basically the same, except that a category that has virtually disappeared in the developed countries has a much greater weight, namely, those who directly work the land. Such people can have access to food without money as they can consume part of what they grow, but here again this is an individual entitlement arising out of a property situation. They are entitled to the food because they own (or have rented) the land on which it is grown. There are also more people in the undeveloped countries whose entitlement arises out of money obtained from petty trading or selling some service rather than from the sale of their labour power.

This, then, is the framework in which famines occur. It enables us to see why the amount of food available in a region is not the determining factor in a famine. The determining factor is the pattern of people's legal entitlement to acquire food and it is changes in this rather than in food availability that provoke famines.

This point, which is fairly obvious when you reflect a little on the nature of the private property world in which we live, has been well developed in a study undertaken by Amartya Sen for the ILO, published in 1981 under the title *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Sen's basic point is that "starvation. . . is a function of entitlements and not of food availability as such":

It is the totality of entitlement relations that governs whether a person will have the ability to acquire enough food to avoid starvation, and food supply is only one influence among many affecting his entitlement relations.

To test the validity of this "entitlement" approach, as opposed to the "food availability decline" approach, Sen examines four famines - the Great Bengal famine of 1943, the Ethiopian famines of 1973 and 1974, the Sahel famines of the 1970s and the 1974 Bangladesh famines. The statistics he produces show that these are better explained in terms of a collapse of entitlements to acquire food legally, through exchange or through direct consumption, among certain sectors of the population rather than in terms of a fall in the amount of food available.

Thus he concludes with regard to the Ethiopian famine of 1973:

The Ethiopian famine took place with no abnormal reduction in food output, and consumption of food per head at the height of the famine in 1973 was fairly normal for Ethiopia as a whole. While the food output in Wollo was substantially reduced in 1973, the inability of Wollo to command food from outside was the result of the low purchasing power in that province. A remarkable feature of the Wollo famine is that food prices in general rose very little, and people were dying of starvation even when food was selling at prices not very different from pre-drought levels. The phenomenon can be understood in terms of extensive entitlement failures of various sections of the Wollo population.

About the Bangladesh famine he says:

The food availability approach offers very little in the way of explanation. . . The total output, as well as availability figures for Bangladesh as a whole, point precisely in the opposite direction, as do the inter-district figures of production as well as availability. Whatever the Bangladesh famine of 1974 might have been, it wasn't a Food Availability Decline famine.

What Sen calls the "entitlement" approach also provides an explanation for the export of food from famine regions:

Viewed from the entitlement angle, there is nothing extraordinary in the market mechanism taking food away from famine-stricken areas to elsewhere. Market demands are not reflections of biological needs or psychological desires, but choices based on exchange entitlement relations. If one doesn't have much to exchange, one can't demand very much, and may thus lose out in competition with others whose needs may be a good deal less acute, but whose entitlements are stronger. In fact, in a slump famine such a tendency will be quite common,

unless other regions have a more severe depression. Thus, food being exported from famine-stricken areas may be a "natural" characteristic of the market which respects entitlement rather than needs.

In other words, people starve because in private property society they have come to have no legal access to the food they need to stay alive. As Sen puts it in the closing paragraph of his book:

The focus on entitlement has the effect of emphasizing legal rights. Other relevant factors, for example market forces, can be seen as operating through a system of legal relations (ownership rights, contractual obligations, legal exchanges etc). The law stands between food availability and food entitlement. starvation deaths can reflect legality with a vengeance.

What is the solution? Sen himself seems to think that famines could be avoided if some sort of social security system was introduced in the undeveloped countries which would ensure people a minimum (even if only a bare minimum) state income when their other "entitlements" fail. Something along these lines may well be tried sometime (where are these poor states going to get the money from?) but manifestly this would only be a palliative. To solve the problem a much more fundamental change is required: the abolition of private property.

All that is on and in the Earth must become the common property of all the people of the Earth. Once the world has been organised on such a communist (in the original sense of the term) basis, access to food, and all other goods, would no longer be dependent on establishing a legal right through owning property, selling one's labour power, and so on, but would be something that every human being would have in application of the principle "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs". Given that a more intensive and extensive use of already-applied agricultural techniques could provide enough food adequately to feed every single man, woman and child on the planet, famine and starvation would be impossible. Indeed, people living in socialism will look back at the twentieth century as a Dark Age of continual wars and famines and will wonder why such things were allowed to happen.