Famines in peasant and market societies. Alan Macfarlane

In order to proceed further into the deeper causes for the control of famine we need to consider the two most influential theories put forward to explain famines. The first was suggested by Adam Smith in **The Wealth of Nations**. He argued that the cause of famine was political - government interference in the working of the market. Scarcities were caused by war and the weather (seasons), but 'a famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniences of a dearth.' He stated that 'In an extensive corn country, between all the different parts of which there is a free commerce and communication, the scarcity occasioned by the most unfavourable seasons can never be so great as to produce a famine...'[1] As long as the market is allowed to operate freely, the laws of supply and demand will prevent a famine. Yet 'When the government, in order to remedy the inconveniences of a dearth, orders all the dealers to sell their corn at what it supposes a reasonable price, it either hinders them from bringing it to market, which may sometimes produce a famine even in the beginning of the season; or if they bring it thither, it enables the people, and thereby encourages them to consume it so fast, as must necessarily produce a famine before the end of the season.'[2] In other words, let the market operate and famine will be avoided.

Smith's views were accepted into the main stream of political economy, being repeated, for instance, by Dugald Stewart[3] and Malthus. Such views probably caused millions to die in Ireland, India and elsewhere in the nineteenth century.[4] This was because they were based on the assumption that the world of an integrated market economy, which Smith was describing, where the invisible hand might be active, applied everywhere. That this was not so in China, India, Ireland or Scotland became increasingly obvious. The nature of the differences was explained by Sen in his book **Poverty and Famines**.

Sen showed that the first half of Smith's argument was correct. Famines are not 'natural', they often occur, as in Bengal in 1943, when there is no absolute shortage of food. But the reasons for some local scarcity turning into famine is not because of government interference. It lies much deeper. Basically, although this is not quite how Sen puts it, we are dealing with pre-market economies. In other words, the laws of supply and demand do not work. The reason for this, as Sen shows, is that while there is 'demand' in one sense, that is people want the food, there is not 'demand' in another, namely the social

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[1] Wealth, ii, 33

[2] Wealth, ii, 33

[3] Collected Works, ix, 51ff

[4] Arnold, Famine, xerox, p.113 outlines some of the disastrous effects of Smith's views in India.

and economic and political structure is such that the poor do not have any purchasing power or, as he calls it, 'entitlements'.

As Sen argues, 'A food-centred view tells us rather little about starvation.' We need to look 'at the food going to **particular** groups...'[5] He agrees that the idea that 'starvation may be caused not by food shortage but by the shortage of income and purchasing power', begins to unravel the difficulty, but that 'income and purchasing power' assumes a monetized market economy. 'Entitlement' is much wider and catches the idea of what anthropologists call 'embedded' economies. Most peasantries do not have 'income' which can be quantified in monetary terms. They have an ability, through labour, land, skills and knowledge to produce a living. This 'entitlement' is always weak. In a period of food shortage, it fades away altogether. They are, like the animals which they start to slaughter, expendable. First the old and young die and are sometimes eaten by the survivors. Then all die. They have no 'force' or 'entitlement'.

This is nothing to do with government price-fixing. It is all to do with the development over time of large masses of the population who are politically and socially weak and living on the edge of starvation. In other words, using Marxist phraseology, it is to do with the relations of production and not the forces of production. 'The entitlement approach places food production within a network of relationships, and shifts in some of these relations can precipitate gigantic famines even without receiving any impulse from food production.'[6]

Thus we are dealing with two very different worlds. In the market-based economies of parts of north-west Europe about which Adam Smith was writing, and in particular the English and Dutch cases, his remarks are probably acceptable. But in the ninety percent of the world outside this little market-capitalist corner, his assumptions did not hold. As Sen summarizes the situation, 'Adam Smith's proposition is, in fact, concerned with efficiency in meeting a market demand, but it says nothing on meeting a need that has not been translated into effective demand because of lack of market-based entitlement and shortage of purchasing power.'[7] The millions who have sold every scrap they have, including their wives and their children, for a little food to prevent themselves from 'dying by inches' were a long way from the relatively privileged world of eighteenth century England. Unfortunately Sen's theories are also open to criticism not only in relation to market-based economies, but also in those non-market cases where there is an absolute and real shortage, as in the Chinese famine of 1876-9, as Arnold points out.[8]

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[5] p.154

[6] Sen, Famines, 159; see also Newman (ed.), Hunger in History, 378.

[7] Seen, Famines, 161

[8] Arnold, Famine (xerox), 45.

It is the general theme of one the largest recent books on famines in peasant societies that there is an inevitable link between non-market (peasant) economies and famines. Seavoy argues that the only way in which famines will be avoided in the future in places such as India or China or Africa is to destroy the peasant mode of production as quickly as possible, and turn people into small rural producers for the market. In essence, the argument is that peasant societies find it very difficult to ensure against periodic fluctuations, to spread risk widely in time and space. Hence they tend to be submerged by temporary fluctuations. Market mechanisms of money, trade, credit and so on are more effective in spreading difficulties and hence lift people above the threshold of famine. Famines and peasants are linked; market capitalism will eliminate famine. It does this by giving everyone minimal entitlements. Let us examine this in its various features.