

Cormac Ó Gráda on Food, Famines and Diseases: A Long History of Dearth and Mortality

Cormac Ó Gráda acerca de alimentação, fomes e doenças: uma longa história de escassez e mortalidade

Cormac Ó Gráda au sujet de la nourriture, des famines et des maladies : Une longue histoire de pénurie et mortalité

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CORMAC Ó GRÁDA ON FOOD, FAMINES AND DISEASES: A LONG HISTORY OF DEARTH AND MORTALITY

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In this interview, Cormac Ó Gráda recalls how he arrived at the topic of famine, starting from economics and the historical Irish case, and how, later on, he started working the subject in other geographic areas. At the same time, Ó Gráda defines the concept of famine, shares his opinion concerning the debate over the causes of famine throughout history (nature vs. society), and identifies some of its effects on population, such as mortality or related diseases. He discusses the long-term effects on health and how food-related diseases have evolved. As for the future, the scholar mentions the prospect of food shortages in coming decades.

Keywords: famine, disease, food, Ireland.

Resumo (PT) no final do artigo. Résumé (FR) en fin d'article.

Cormac Ó Gráda (born in 1945) is an Irish economic historian and professor emeritus of economics at University College Dublin. His research has focused on the economic history of Ireland, Irish demographic changes, and the Great Irish Famine (as well as other famines in different geographies and chronologies), among other topics. Alone or with colleagues, he has addressed issues ranging from the role of science in the Industrial Revolution to plague in seventeenth-century London, and from the Little Ice Age in Europe



to the famines of World Wars I and II. He is a prolific scholar, having published dozens of papers as well as several books, the most recent being *Famine – a Short History* (2009), *Eating People Is Wrong* (2015), and *Famine in European History* (2017), co-edited with Guido Alfani.

In September 2019, Cormac Ó Gráda was in Lisbon to speak about “Europe’s last famines” as part of a cycle of workshops and conferences on the “History of Poverty and Hunger”, organised by the Institute of Contemporary History (IHC, NOVA FCSH) and the National Library of Portugal. In this conversation, which took place on the eve of his lecture, he shares with us his definition of famine, talks about the causes of famines throughout history, and discusses their effects on population. Finally, Ó Gráda mentions future outlines on food shortages.

Helena Silva, Ana Isabel Queiroz (HS, AIQ): *You are “the person” to talk about Famines in History. By way of introduction, could you briefly explain how you arrived at this topic? As an Irish historian, we imagine “Black’47” could have triggered your interest... is it true?*¹

Cormac Ó Gráda (COG): First, by way of background, I am an economist rather than a historian. I actually do not have much formal background in history and one could say I am a self-taught historian. I came to famine from economics through economic history. I did my PhD in economics in the 70s in Columbia University, New York, where I wrote a thesis on 19th century Irish agriculture, which contained very little about the Great Irish Famine because I thought it was too big a topic. I think I was a bit afraid of it, and so I wrote about agriculture before and after the famine and other related topics. It was a little bit later when I wrote a book of essays, the first serious book I wrote, called *Ireland before and after the Famine* (Ó Gráda 1988). It has a long chapter about the Famine (with a capital “F”, because Ireland had many other famines). Then around that time, I was commissioned by the British Economic History Society to write a pamphlet about the Great Irish Famine, which I did. That appeared in 1989 (Ó Gráda 1989). Then somewhat later I wrote another big long chapter about the Famine in a general economic history of Ireland, a big book which is still in print (Ó Gráda 1994). All of this was about the Irish Famine.

¹ Black’47 and the Great Famine are names given to the famine that affected Ireland between 1846 and 1850, being 1847 the worst year. It provoked the death of one million Irish and mass emigration.

HS, AIQ: *Although Ireland was extremely affected by famines, it is far from being the only country you have been working on...*

COG: I have broadened my focus, and I have written a lot about famines in different places, partly because I was always interested in the Irish Famine for what it would tell us about other famines, and partly because I believed other famines might offer insights on how different the Irish famine was. I had that kind of comparative context and that gradually got me interested in working on famines in other places, beginning with France. I wrote a paper with a French colleague, Jean-Michel Chevet, on how markets worked during the French famines of the *Ancien Régime* (Ó Gráda and Chevet 2002). It is an economics paper that involved a good deal of reading into French history. And using the same methodology, I wrote a paper on Finland in the nineteenth-century (Ó Gráda 2001a).

I also got interested in India and, in particular, in the Great Bengal Famine of World War II (Ó Gráda 2001b, 2008). That was a very educational process. The Bengal famine is important in the history of famines, because of the work of Amartya Sen (1981), the Nobel prize-winning economist. He was born in Bengal and observed the famine at first hand when he was young. Later he got interested in studying it, and developed a particular approach to the analysis of famines, based on the Bengal famine. For him, that was a famine that happened even though there was no food shortage; there was no harvest failure but the food was not distributed properly. I am a great admirer of Amartya Sen's work but I disagree with him on some of this, because I believe there was a problem with food availability. But the authorities did not want to admit this at the time because it would have meant to move resources that would be useful in the war effort, in order to help civilians in Bengal. So, the authorities argued that there was enough food if everybody behaved in a patriotic way and shared with their neighbours. I do not think that is in fact the truth.

HS, AIQ: *Therefore, your diagnosis of the causes of famines in the past summons multiple factors. Recently, you published with Guido Alfani an article where you use a novel dataset and temporal scan analysis to identify periods when famines were particularly frequent in Europe, from ca. 1250 to the present. You find “strong evidence that before 1710 high population pressure on resources was by far the most frequent remote cause of famines (while the proximate cause was almost invariably meteorological)” (Alfani and Ó Gráda 2018). Is there still the classical debate about the causes that originate famines: man-made vs. “natural” events?*

COG: Definitely! The Bengal famine has become a kind of a paradigm and other scholars have tried to study famines using the same perspective as Amartya Sen used, arguing that the problem is not so much the lack of food or economic backwardness *per se* but that, for some reason, landless people find themselves in a situation that they can no longer afford food. The price of food rises but not workers' wages. The context is a more commercialised economy where markets are not functioning properly, where you might have merchants thinking that prices are going to raise even higher, so they hold back and speculate, or you might have farmers saying "we're not going to sell now because the price is going to be higher later". And, of course, in the meantime people starve, because of, if you like, a market malfunction.

The traditional view of famines, going back to Malthus, is that famine happens in backward countries because of harvest failures. Today, such harvest failures would not matter because you can always import food from somewhere else or there are stocks held over from previous harvests. But in a backward country, those choices are not available, so people are very vulnerable to harvest failures; that is the Malthusian view. Sen did not deny that possibility but claimed that you do not have to have a harvest failure to have a famine, you can have a famine for the reasons just explained. In fact, there is always tension between, on the one hand, blaming harvest failure on economic backwardness and, on the other, on people's behaviour in the sense that famine happens because of what people do (or do not do): what the farmers do or what the merchants do or what the elites do or do not. And my view is that obviously the more backward the country, the more likely the harvest failure is going to cause a problem. But, nearly always, the elites can do something. They may not be able to prevent famine outright but they can reduce mortality. So, arguing either that famines are all about Malthus or all about human agency is incomplete; you need a bit of both.

For instance, to go back to the Irish Famine, what sparked it off was an ecological disaster. The potato failed and a third of the population, at the time, consumed basically nothing else. The other two thirds consumed some potatoes but they did not rely on potatoes exclusively. So when the potato failed, obviously there were very serious problems and a very serious crisis. And it is difficult to see how all deaths could have been avoided. But was it necessary for one million people to die, or for the famine to continue so long? I would say no. I would say that the authorities could have done more. They could have pursued different policies, which they chose not to. It is not that they deliberately wanted to see people die, but they were negligent, callous, and lacking of empathy for the poor.

HS, AIQ: *And the population was already vulnerable....*

COG: Yes, very. As long as the potato did not fail, it was quite good food, very monotonous, but nutritious. Before the famine, the Irish had very little; bad housing, torn clothes, they were barefoot, and a lot of them were illiterate. But in terms of calories, they were okay, as long as the potato did not fail, because they were over dependent on the potato. And nothing like the failure that happened had ever happen before. You can say: "Should people have expected something like that to happen?" There were some who said it could happen, that is true. But realistically, on the basis of all the evidence one had hoped to, you would say, it is not likely; but it did happen. Then the issue is how do you deal with it.

HS, AIQ: *You told famines had several demographic impacts along history as higher mortality, lower marriage and birth-rates. Were all individuals affected the same way by famine or were there gender, age, and social differences? What can you tell us from your research?*

COG: The Irish Famine was an absolute catastrophe in the history of famine because a very high proportion of the population was affected and died. But even there, some people probably benefited, although a small minority. I wrote a chapter on winners and losers to highlight this point (Ó Gráda 1999, 122-156). Famines inflict a hierarchy of suffering. In Ireland, for example, farmers who employed labour were affected because the subsistence wage was now higher than before. Workers who previously lived on potatoes now needed a more expensive food, rye or oatmeal, in order to live. We can think of farmers being affected in that way. Landlords would have been affected because farmers were less able to pay rent. We can think of these people obviously suffering, although they did not suffer in the same way that people who owned very little land or who were landless. Even there you can think of some steps on the ladder. Those people who were affected badly and who decided that their way of making the living was gone, in some cases, they could afford to emigrate. One of the big thing that makes the Irish Famine different was that huge numbers of people emigrated, usually estimated at over a million. Some of those probably would have gone anyway. But those who left had to have some capital in order to be able to afford to go! Below them there was a group who simply could not afford to go. They were the worst affected. Thus, we can think of a high hierarchy of suffering.

All famines are unequal in the way they affect people. This is what Amartya Sen wants to emphasize and it is fundamental. But there are other differences. One, which some people find surprising and, nevertheless, is

a common characteristic, is that women tend to be more resilient during famines than men. Is this cultural, or is it physiological? My sense is that it is physiological because people have been looking at the impact of food shortages and having no food at all, not just on people, but on animals in the wild and in laboratories. The females of the species are generally at resisting hunger. But then there is the argument that maybe in famine circumstances women have more control over the food and crops. I am not convinced by that, but there could be something to it (Ó Gráda 2009, 98-102; 1999, 101-104). Setting aside gender differences, in the event of a famine, all people typically die sooner than they would otherwise. That is probably because they are weaker. It may also be cause those who are younger do not look after their old people anymore. I have written about the horrors of famine and how people behave in ways that they would not normally do (Ó Gráda 2009, 45-68; 2015a, 11-37). In normal times, they might look after them and instead they say: “Look, this is different.”

HS, AIQ: *Like the elderly, infants are also more vulnerable in times of famine?*

COG: There is an issue about infants and children: among those who are born, they are certainly more vulnerable, but fewer are born. Two things are going on. There are fewer infants to die, but a higher proportion of those who are born do not survive. This sounds like a technical demographic point, but it means that the outcome is a little bit ambiguous in terms of statistics for very young kids.

HS, AIQ: *After the potato blight and when people was recovering from the Great Irish Famine, it became clear that over-dependence on a single crop is a danger for the population subsistence. Did it change the diet and the countryside landscape? Did they stop cultivating that plant species or variety? Did they find a substitute?*

COG: Absolutely. After the potato blight, agriculture would never be the same again. It was not like the potato blight came and went away; it is still there. It is endemic. One thing that meant is that Ireland had eight and a half million people when the potato blight came and there was no going back to the same population numbers because the food to sustain them is not there anymore. The effective way of dealing with a sustainable population was to help people to emigrate. A lot of people said it but the authorities did not and were not prepared to provide it. They could not do it for free. And the poorest people, who needed the help the most, who needed to get out, for the most part, they did not get the help for. So, what happened? Afterwards, the area under the potato plummeted from about

5 million hectares before the famine to 2 million after it. So it is not that the potato disappeared, but yields were reduced by the fungus for a few years until a remedy, spraying with copper sulphate, was developed. The chemical is still used not just against potato diseases but against those of grapes and so on. In Ireland, it became available in the 1880s and 1890s and then yields recovered. People continued to grow potatoes and experimented different varieties.

The potato we consume today are very different from what people consumed in Ireland before the famine. In the eve of the famine the very poor consumed a variety of potato which was respectable in terms of nutrition, but bland in terms of taste. I carried out some research on their food content in the 1990s. These “Lumper” potatoes survived in agricultural research stations, so I had their specific gravity tested, and it turned out that they were not bad in terms of the number of calories per kilo (Ó Gráda 1988, 89-90). They were not bad but you would not want to eat them now. If you had a choice you would certainly eat something else.

HS, AIQ: *You wrote that “making famine history is not the same thing as making hunger history” (Ó Gráda 2015a, 208). How do you “distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary”? Could you distinguish the terms famine, hunger and starvation?*

COG: I see famines as killing events. They cause deaths due to starvation or through hunger related diseases. And this could be either because of a lack of food or because food is not available. You need a definition but that would exclude what people call “food crises”, which are probably too small to be called famines. Famine is an event that affects a community, not only one or two people dying – that happens in rich countries – and famine has a start and an end. It is not like a condition of constant malnutrition; it is a condition where maybe people are fairly hungry in normal times, but then there is peak mortality, followed by recovery.

HS, AIQ: *So, famines are “events”...*

COG: Yes, while starvation can be a “condition” or a “steady-state”, where the number of calories consumed or the number of grams, on average, is less than the ideal, in good as well as in bad years. Whereas a famine is a crisis, it is a disaster. People die, terrible things happen, and the way in which people behave also changes. People who are maybe normally generous, focus on themselves, and some of them commit crimes, maybe engaging and borrowing money in a way that they would not normally do, deserting children, for example. And then, I got interested about ten years ago on this issue of famine cannibalism, which is quite rare actually,

but it can happen. In history there was probably more of it than we like to imagine (Ó Gráda 2015a, 11-37).

HS, AIQ: *And infanticide...*

COG: Yes, and infanticide too (Ó Gráda 2009, 61-62; Kelly 2019).

HS, AIQ: *You mentioned that famine has a link to excess mortality but you also wrote “infectious diseases rather than literal starvation usually account for most famine deaths” (Ó Gráda 2007, 20). What were these “hunger-induced diseases” and how were they actually related with famine?*

COG: Starting off from the Irish context the impression we all have grown up with was that most people died of literal starvation, maybe trying to survive on grass, and dying on the road; that is, they starved in the “clinical” sense. I have worked on this issue with an old friend of mine, Joel Mokyr, using admittedly imperfect data on deaths in the 1851 population census, which we did our best to adjust (Mokyr and Ó Gráda 2002). And our answer was that most people died of typhus or more directly hunger related diseases like dysentery and food poisoning. Eating the wrong kind of food, eating rotten food, eating food that people were not used to, including substitutes that they would not touch in a normal situation. Sometimes people might eat food that had slightly gone off and get poisoned.

You do not have to be starving to die of typhus. Typhus was endemic in Ireland in normal times, although not many people died of it, and the poor had built a kind of immunity to it; they could react and survive. Famines cause people to behave in ways that make typhus much more likely. They do not wash; they do not change their clothes; they move around a lot; they migrate from the countryside into the city or the town looking for relief or looking for work, so disease spreads in that way. Quite a few people who died in Ireland in the 1840s were by no means starving. These would include clergymen, priests, medical practitioners, people who were involved in administering poor relief, people who worked in the workhouse, for example, and also philanthropists, people who doled out food at soup kitchens; they were all in danger. Now having said that, I do not want to give the impression that they were as likely to die as the poor, because as Karl Marx once said, “the Irish famine killed poor devils only”. That is broadly speaking true. But the deaths of a relatively small number of landlords and philanthropists is also part of the story.

I make a distinction between traditional famines and modern famines. By modern famines I mean ones where most people die of literal starvation. And that is after the development of the germ theory of disease, where people

really know what causes typhus and how to avoid it, and the importance of hygiene, the importance of not drinking water which you are not sure of. Probably a lot of people contracted typhus before the germs theory of disease because they had a wrong view of what caused it; they thought it was bad air. In the twentieth century in rich countries, when famines happened, people died of starvation; they did not die of these diseases.

HS, AIQ: *Famines have several long-run consequences. What about the long-term health effects of famine on survivors?*

COG: Since the 1970s scholars have been invoking famines as laboratories to test the so-called Foetal Origins Hypothesis, i.e. they have analysed the impact of famine on the physical and mental health of adults born during famine. This originates with two epidemiologists, Nina Stein and Mervyn Susser, who worked on the Dutch hunger winter of 1944-45 (or *Hongerwinter*). They used data on Dutch military conscripts, but the results of that study were “disappointing” in the sense there was no evident effect.² Stein and Susser realised more clearly later that this could have been because during the *Hongerwinter* the poor were less likely to have children. As a result, the kids they were looking at were selected. They were more middle class kids and because of that they were not going to be hungry in the way they expected. The outcome combined two effects of famine: the scarring caused by famine and the selection caused by the impact on the composition of births. So the children who were might be affected in some way but not enough to impact on their health forty years ahead. Selection and scarring worked in opposite directions. And so the challenge became how to correct for selection.

HS, AIQ: *It sounds like an interpretation too much centered on the role of genes... Is it a Neo-Darwinist reasoning?*

COG: Yes, it could be interpreted that way, I suppose, but it could also be seen as the claim that environmental factors – in particular, adequate care *in utero* and in infancy – matter for adult health. In order to control for selection the Dutch-born, New York-based epidemiologist, Lambert H. Lumey had the bright idea of comparing siblings born before, during and after the *Hongerwinter*, which would seem to control for social class (Lumey and Stein 1997). Lumey’s findings are probably the most robust of those based on the Dutch evidence. One of the difficulties is that you

² This famine took place in the German-occupied Netherlands, especially in the densely populated western provinces north of the great rivers, during the winter of 1944-45, see Stein *et al.* (1975) and Willcox (2003).

are assuming that people were poorly fed but you cannot directly figure out what they consumed or what their parents, particularly their mothers, consumed. You just do not know; you are inferring consumption. That is another insurmountable problem. You can say that on average, in certain parts of western Holland, in particular in the big towns, conditions were worse than they were in the east where there was not a blockade and where food was fairly plentiful actually.

At this stage, nearly half a century after the Stein-Susser study (Stein *et al.* 1975), the most robust outcomes include the finding that people who were unlucky enough to be in utero during a famine suffered a higher probability of ending up being schizophrenic and that born maybe just after a famine are more likely to be diabetic or to suffer from coronary disease in middle age. But it is not that everybody is affected. Since then people have worked on other famines and economists have got involved. For them, sample selection is a challenge, not a nuisance. It is almost something they want to be able to solve, they want to solve.

HS, AIQ: *Can you enumerate other studies from this long-term effects of famines?*

COG: There is a growing literature that invokes the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-1961. People who were born during it are now old enough so that these effects would be visible if they are present. But a recent meta-analysis of studies of the impact of the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine which “raises questions about the design and analysis of current studies”, finds that the data “show no long-term health effects except for schizophrenia” (Li and Lumey 2017). In general, there has been a tendency, I think, to exaggerate the results of these famine studies and that is because unexciting results are difficult to get published. There may be a publication bias issue, and if you carry out years of research and you find that there is no effect, the people who funded your research may be disappointed. It is fair to expect some FOH effect but it is probably fair too to suspect that results have been overhyped.

HS, AIQ: *Although hunger persists, even in rich countries, what are today's problems? Is there the risk of a “new variant famine”?*³

COG: I have been arguing for a long time that, for now, the era of peacetime famines is past. For instance, it could be argued that the last peacetime famines in Malawi and Niger early in the millennium were hardly

3 This is an expression used by Alex de Waal and Alan Whiteside, see Ó Gráda (2015a, 186).

famines at all. Arguing that raises the hackles of some aid workers. There was a time when such claims interfered with the campaigning strategies of NGOs. But Irish humanitarian agencies which had their origins in famine relief reached a point in the 1990s when they realised, “well look, there aren’t any famines anymore. It’s not credible to be looking for money to deal with famine, because there are no famines. We must come up with a new strategy if we are to survive as an organization.” And they shifted then to looking at issues of hunger and development and distinct from famine.

When I am asked to talk on conferences about food sustainability, all I can do is really talk about the past and how things have changed. And I have got interested, I have written a little bit about these NGOs and that is something that I keep in touch with (Ó Gráda 2015b). They have evolved from famine in the 1970s and 1980s to hunger in the 1990s and 2000s, and to malnutrition, which is a distinct problem, in the 2010s; it is about people eating the wrong kind of food. In behavioral economics there is this expression “that you can nudge people”, meaning that you can convince them. But getting people to change their behavior can be very difficult. Other issues are probably going to come up in future with global warming, like sustainability, and it is going to be a much trickier issue. I am not an expert on it.

HS, AIQ: *Maybe history can somehow contribute to change that.*

COG: Historians are really poor predictors of the future, although they are probably as well equipped to predict the future as other social scientists. In so far as peacetime famines are concerned, I would be broadly optimistic for the next few decades. Then, if global warming becomes a very serious issue, the bets are off. Then famine could rear its head again in peacetime conditions. Another phenomenon which clearly would become much more widespread would be migration, with people moving from areas which are no longer viable in agricultural terms. But that is not something I would foresee in the next ten or twenty years. After that, you would have to worry. Finally, you can never discount the probability of famines happening when there are wars. Preventing war is another way of preventing famine.

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CORMAC Ó GRÁDA ACERCA DE ALIMENTAÇÃO, FOMES E DOENÇAS: UMA LONGA HISTÓRIA DE ESCASSEZ E MORTALIDADE

Nesta entrevista, Cormac Ó Gráda recorda que chegou ao estudo do tema da fome partindo da economia e do caso específico da história irlandesa, para posteriormente abordar o assunto noutras áreas geográficas. Ao mesmo tempo, Ó Gráda define o conceito de fome, posiciona-se em relação ao debate sobre as causas da fome ao longo da história (natureza vs. sociedade), e identifica alguns dos seus efeitos sobre as populações, tais como a mortalidade ou as doenças associadas. Discute as implicações a longo prazo na

saúde e a forma como as doenças alimentares têm evoluído. No que respeita ao futuro, o académico deixa em aberto a possibilidade de novos contornos para situações de carência alimentar.

Palavras-chave: fome, doença, alimentação, Irlanda.

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CORMAC Ó GRÁDA AU SUJET DE LA NOURRITURE, DES FAMINES ET DES MALADIES : UNE LONGUE HISTOIRE DE PÉNURIE ET MORTALITÉ

Cormac Ó Gráda nous rappelle comment il est arrivé au thème de la famine, en partant de l'Économie et du cas historique de l'Irlande, pour traiter ensuite le sujet dans d'autres zones géographiques. Au même temps, Ó Gráda définit la notion de faim, se positionne dans le débat sur les causes de la famine au cours de l'histoire (nature vs société), et identifie quelques-uns des effets sur les populations, tels que la mortalité ou les maladies connexes. Il discute ensuite les implications à long-terme dans la santé et comment les maladies alimentaires ont évolué. En ce qui concerne l'avenir, l'universitaire laisse en ouvert la possibilité de changements pour les situations de pénurie alimentaire.

Mots-clés: faim, maladie, nourriture, Irlande.