# THE POLITICS OF HUNGER
## PETER QUINN

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# Hunger Games
## *Who Gets to Eat & Who Decides*

### Peter Quinn

Along with air and water, food is the common denominator of human survival. Throughout history, the quest for daily sustenance has often been precarious. Food shortages caused by crop failures or extreme weather were (and are) common enough. But beginning with the Industrial Revolution in the mid-seventeenth century, as millions left the land for the cities and populations exploded, thinkers disagreed about how best to feed people in an economy based on manufacturing rather than agriculture. Should it be left to the free market? Or should governments take control? What criteria should be used to decide who gets fed—and in what amount—and who doesn't? Are some more deserving of being fed than others?

Weighing in on these questions, Adam Smith was sanguine. In 1776 he published *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he lauded the free market and the profit motive as drivers of economic progress. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner," he wrote, "but from their regard to their own interest." The "invisible hand" of competition would harness private ambition to the public good. Smith's near-contemporary Thomas Malthus was far more pessimistic. Malthus's influential tract *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798 and revised several times afterward, turned the invisible hand into an iron fist: Unless kept in check, he maintained, human reproduction would outrun the best efforts to increase the food supply and would lead inevitably to famine and mass death.

Charles Darwin and Karl Marx sided more with Smith than with Malthus. Although Malthus's assertion of the indifference and profligacy with which nature spawned and destroyed life helped Darwin formulate his theory of "natural selection," in which only the fittest survived, Darwin believed that famines no longer played a critical part in human evolution. In his seminal book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he described "famines and other such accidents" as occurrences "to which savages are so liable." In *The Descent of Man* (1871), he expanded on that liability:
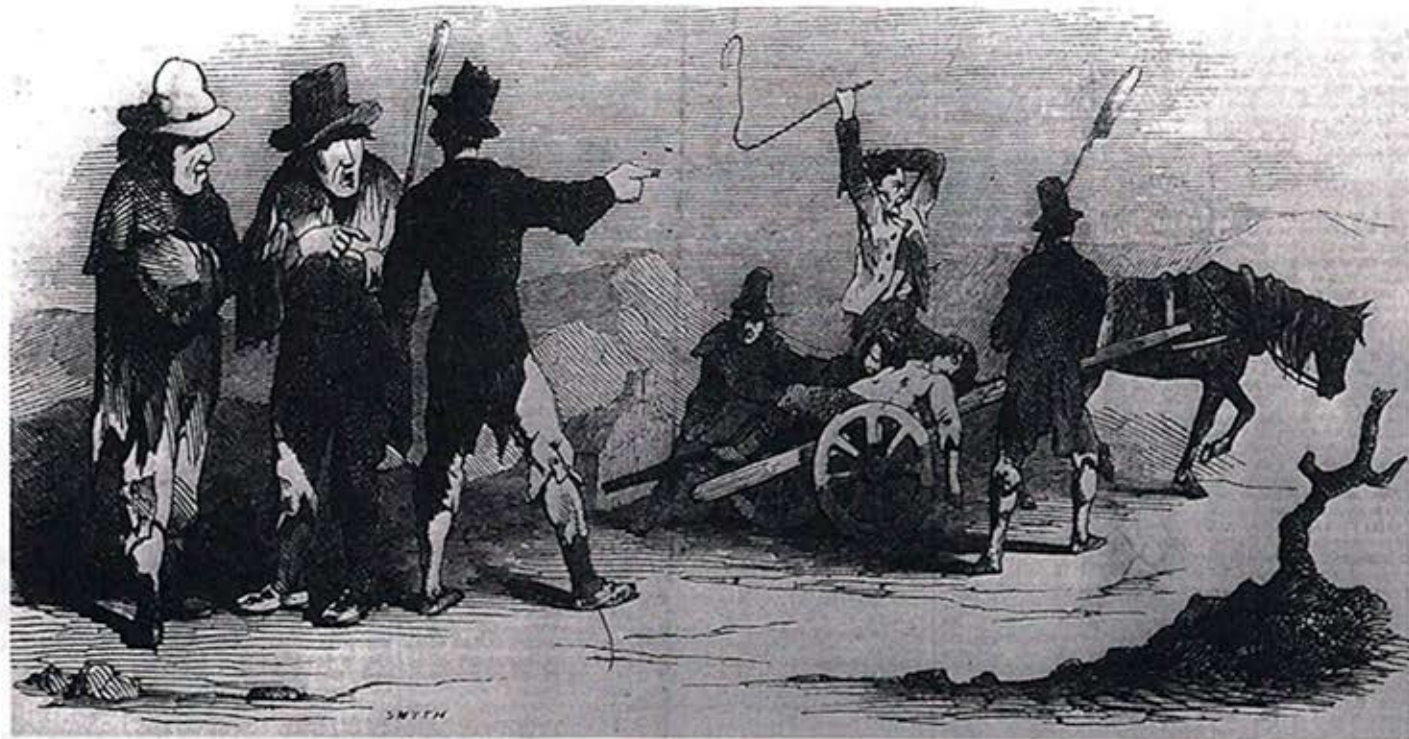
With savages the difficulty of obtaining subsistence occasionally limits their number in a much more direct manner than with civilized people, for all tribes periodically suffer from severe famines. At such times savages are forced to devour much bad food, and their health can hardly fail to be injured.

Darwin's comment offers no hint that even as he worked in his home in Cornwall writing *On the Origin of Species*, the greatest civilian catastrophe in nineteenth-century Europe was unfolding just a day's journey away, in Ireland—the Irish famine, which triggered waves of mass death and emigration. The failure on Darwin's part to mention the Irish famine might have reflected his belief that it was a historical aberration, or perhaps he wished to steer clear of the political and nationalistic passions it stirred.

Karl Marx, on the other hand, was too busy hailing the coming triumph of the urban proletariat to pay attention to the collapse of the antiquated and doomed social structure of rural Ireland. Marx didn't touch on events in Ireland in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848 at the height of the famine. Instead he celebrated the bourgeoisie as the gravedigger of the old order: "It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life." In his masterwork, *Das Kapital* (1867)—he sent an inscribed copy to Darwin—he wrote dismissively that "the Irish famine of 1846 killed more than 1,000,000 people, but it killed poor devils only."

In *Famine: A Short History* (2009), Irish economist Cormac Ó Gráda questions whether famines ever served as a Malthusian check on population. "In the past," Ó Gráda contends, "the demographic impact of famines tended to be relatively short-lived." Disease provided the Grim Reaper a more reliable scythe, especially among infants and the aged. It's undeniable, however, that famines played a critical role in the struggle for global supremacy that unfolded from the middle of the nineteenth century into the second part of the twentieth. Along with John Kelly's eminently readable history of the Irish famine, *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*,

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"The Great Famine," illustration by Smyth in the Illustrated London News, 1847

three recent books—Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Lizzie Collingham's *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*, and *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958–1962* by Yang Jisheng—provide instructive reminders of the degree to which food supply has been used as a tool of social engineering and a weapon of war.

As these books make clear, between 1845 and 1961—a span of little more than a century—the number of deaths from hunger and its effects exceeded the total in all of preceding human history. The ratio of deaths to population in the Irish famine (1845–51) and the Chinese famine (1958–61) represent record rates of mortality. The central problem in most modern famines was never an absolute lack of food. At issue was distribution. Contra Malthus, the volume of mortality wasn't simply a case of too many mouths to feed; rather, to one degree or another, economic theories and government bureaucracies were the culprits. This was no mere innocent bureaucratic bungling, as John Kelly's book makes clear. On the contrary, these catastrophes were either used or conceived to bring about the modernization of underlying socioeconomic structures.

How did this happen? The short answer is that hunger shook hands with administrative bureaucracy, economic theory, and political ideology. As Cormac Ó Gráda reminds us, the United Kingdom of the 1840s possessed "the wealthiest economy in the world." Its navy and merchant marine ruled and regulated world trade. It dominated markets across the globe, sometimes—as with the Opium Wars with China—prying them open at gunpoint. Its manufacturing prowess was unchallenged. For all these reasons, Britain in the mid-nineteenth century could accurately be described as the first nation to make the full transition into modernity. The Irish

famine was part of this transition. With the arrival of a devastating potato blight in the autumn of 1845, Sir Robert Peel, the Tory prime minister, took steps to prevent a catastrophic increase in mortality. But Peel also intended to use the crisis to break the tenacious grip of Ireland's small farmers and laborers on their paltry holdings and turn them into wage earners employed on large, efficient farms—or factory workers in the industrial centers of the British Isles.

Peel may have hoped this could be done with a minimum of distress to the several million people at the bottom of the Irish economic pyramid, but by the summer of 1846 he was out of office—and Sir John Russell, his Liberal Party successor, was a disciple of the Manchester School, which held that government should abstain from interference with the laws of supply and demand. This faith was reinforced by the reigning orthodoxies of Protestant Evangelicalism and Providentialism, which rested on the confidence that God sent disasters like the potato blight as punishment for human transgressions and as an opportunity for imposing the kind of moral reform that would bring Ireland into conformity with the superior values of Anglo-Saxon society. As the *London Times* editorialized in the autumn of 1846, "An island, a social state, a race is to be changed. The surface of the land, its divisions, its culture...its law, its language, and the heart of a people who for two thousand years have remained unalterable within the compass of those mighty changes which have given us European civilization, are all to be created anew."

Before the work of re-creation came the job of razing what was in place. Sir Charles Trevelyan, an eminent Victorian who served as assistant secretary of the Treasury, welcomed the blight as a heaven-sent chance to "cure" the Irish of

chronic dependency. In 1847, the Parliament abandoned any pretense of assisting the Irish—shutting down soup kitchens and other relief efforts—and acted to facilitate clearing the land of as many tenants as possible. For anyone remotely acquainted with the situation in Ireland, the consequences were obvious. "But unlike the morally blinkered, who saw only hunger, misery, and death in the ruined potato fields," writes John Kelly sardonically," Mr. Trevelyan saw the restless hand of God at work."

In his 1860 jeremiad *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, Irish nationalist John Mitchel charged that "the Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine." In indicting the British government for "deliberate murder" —the word "genocide" wouldn't be coined for another eight decades—he articulated a sentiment shared by many Irish and Irish-Americans, both then and today. Kelly's judgment on this question—that while "the intent" of British relief policy "may not have been genocidal…the effects were"—is equivocal. But perhaps it's as close to the truth as we can get. Though contempt for the Irish colored everything they did, Trevelyan and company neither caused the blight nor set out to send a million people to their deaths. Yet they concocted a policy of malign neglect and active interference designed to use a food shortage to reshape Irish society. Whether the Irish wasted away from hunger and disease or fled abroad—in excess of 2 million emigrated in a single decade—didn't matter. The ideological end of modernizing "an island, a social state, a race" justified the means.

**M**ore than half a century later, in the wake of World War I, hunger once again became a tool of peacetime social engineering on a massive scale. In sync with the "scientific certainties" of Marxism, the Bolshevik faction under Lenin that took control of Russia in 1917 believed in iron laws of economics as devoutly as did the acolytes of the Manchester School. Yet the fruit that had fallen into their lap wasn't, as Marx had predicted, an industrialized society planted and ripened by the bourgeoisie, but rather the ramshackle, backward, heavily agricultural Czarist Empire, where socialism would have to be sown and grown, not reaped through revolution.

Timothy Snyder portrays Lenin as shrewdly tempering ruthlessness with realism, conducting a "political holding action" that gave a degree of autonomy to the various republics and allowed private ownership. But after Lenin's death in 1924, his choice as general secretary of the Communist Party, the crafty and conscienceless Joseph Stalin, put aside his predecessor's caution and pursued an overnight transformation of the new Soviet state. Begun in 1928, Stalin's first Five Year Plan was a breakneck push into urban-industrial modernity premised on returning peasants to serfdom. Their crops would feed the cities and provide exports to generate the hard currency to buy foreign machinery. The wealthier

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peasants were tagged *kulaks* ("tight-fisted"), an elastic label stretched to include anyone who resisted surrendering his holdings, however meager, to the state. Tens of thousands were shot; 1.7 million were deported to the Gulag.

The epicenter of this action was Ukraine, which, in Snyder's description, became "a giant starvation camp, with watchtowers, sealed borders, pointless and painful labor, and endless and predictable death" (see "Europe's Darkest Hour," *Commonweal*, February 22, 2011). The result was the famine of 1930–33—"the greatest artificial famine in the history of the world": more than 5 million died in what Snyder deems an act of deliberate genocide directed against the Ukrainian people. Writing in the *London Review of Books* (November 4, 2010), historian Richard J. Evans argued that Stalin's starvation policy didn't actually single out Ukrainians but was directed against kulaks—many of them Russian. Yet Snyder is indisputably correct when he emphasizes the non-Malthusian essence of Stalin's famine, which "took place in times of peace, and was related more or less distantly to an ideologically informed vision of modernization."

During World War II, Adolf Hitler pursued a policy—justified as a requirement of German national survival and as a right conferred by racial superiority—of making war in order to seize new national living space (*lebensraum*). The key lay in the East, from which, as Lizzie Collingham puts it, Hitler imagined Germany could carve out "its own version of the American west." Collingham's enlightening book reveals the extent to which food production, distribution, and consumption were critical to the conduct and outcome of the war. Often ignored or relegated to the war's backstory, food, as Collingham tells it, was a prime motive in the ambitions of the aggressors and a strategic priority among the major combatants.

In 1941, a critical year in the war, Hitler launched Opera-

tion Barbarossa, in the hope of scoring a lightning victory over the U.S.S.R. Like Stalin, Hitler focused on a swift and radical transformation of the Soviet countryside, particularly Ukraine. Herbert Backe, head of the innocuous-sounding Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture, drafted the Nazi blueprint. A classic "desk criminal" (*Schreibtischtater*) who never served on the front or set foot in a death camp, Backe laid out a grand scheme for a postwar resettlement—"The Hunger Plan"—that envisioned "a European California," its "idyllic new towns and ideal agricultural communities" built on the graves of 30 million Slavs methodically starved to death, with another 70 million shipped off to the Soviet Arctic zone to labor and die in a gulag now under German management.

In the event—and at the price of horrendous losses—the Red Army stopped the Nazi onslaught, and the Hunger Plan was never put into full operation. Nevertheless, Hitler used hunger against his opponents wherever he could. Patients in the Reich's mental hospitals were put on a diet designed to kill in three months. Of the 3 million Soviet POWs who died in captivity, Timothy Snyder estimates that 2.6 million perished from hunger. Several million Soviet civilians starved, 1 million in the siege of Leningrad alone. And many of the 6 million Jews who perished, both in and out of the death camps, died from hunger.

On the Western front of the war, Hitler had hoped that a relentless campaign of U-Boat attacks could damage Britain's supply lines so badly it would be forced to make peace. And indeed, at their peak, U-Boats sank about 10 percent of food shipments to Britain. Thanks to the astounding prodigality of U.S. supplies and shipping, however, the U-Boat attacks never came close to sinking Britain itself. "Throughout the worst months of the Battle of the Atlantic," Collingham concludes, "British civilians were never confronted with the problem of hunger, let alone the specter of starvation."

For its part, Britain ran its wartime food policies according to what Collingham describes as "an unspoken food hierarchy" that relegated the needs of its colonial subjects to the bottom. As she reports, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his War Cabinet decided "that India would be the part of the empire where the greatest civilian sacrifices would have to be made." When told that the food situation in India had become critical, the War Cabinet's reaction, in Collingham's judgment, was "irresponsible and brutal." Echoing Trevelyan's verdict on the Irish a century before,

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Churchill "claimed that Indians had brought these problems on themselves by breeding like rabbits and must pay the price of their own improvidence." The Bengal famine that raged between 1943 and '44 killed approximately 3 million people. Confronted with the facts of what was happening, Churchill asked "if food was so scarce in India, why had Gandhi not yet died?" That famine, ironically, was carved forever into the childhood consciousness of Amartya Sen, then a nine-year-old boy in West Bengal. Sen grew up to become a Nobel Prize–winning economist whose seminal work on famine has revealed how far the phenomenon rests not on actual shortages of food, but on social inequalities and on politicizations of the food-provision mechanisms that invariably work against the poor.

As for the other major combatant nations in World War II, imperial Japan didn't plan for systematically starving those under its sway. In Collingham's view, however, the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the planned settlement of a million Japanese farmers in Manchuria shared the same rationale as the German drive for *lebensraum*; expansionism and the exploitation of conquered peoples and territories were seen as the sine qua non of being a player on the world stage. Collingham estimates the toll inflicted by the Japanese invasion of China to be "at least 15 million civilians, 85 percent of them peasants, and virtually all them the victims of deprivation and starvation." The suffering in China was paralleled by that in Indo-China, where Japan's "ruthless requisitioning of rice" led to the Tonkin famine, in which 1 to 2 million Vietnamese died of hunger, with new research suggesting "that the scale of the horror was far greater."

Despite early success at plundering the empire they'd conquered, the Japanese themselves soon felt the effects of the counterattack mounted by the far more powerful United States. Where German U-Boats failed to sever Britain's supply lines, the U.S. submarine campaign shredded Japan's maritime supply lanes. By 1944, Japan's shipping capacity had been reduced by 60 percent, and the situation quickly worsened, threatening ultimately to become militarily decisive. As Collingham makes clear, citing Napoleon's famous adage that "an army travels on its stomach," Japan's military crawled to defeat on a nearly empty belly, with "60 percent, or more than 1 million, of the total 1.74 million Japanese military deaths between 1941 and 1945…caused by starvation and diseases associated with malnutrition."

These food-related deaths were the result of dedicated

American military policies. Beginning in March 1945, the United States undertook Operation Starvation, dedicating a special force of B-29s under General Curtis Lemay to seed the waters around the home islands with mines. Japanese shipping was paralyzed. Hunger was rampant, famine inevitable. Only the dropping of the atom bombs spared the Japanese from having to choose, in the end, between starvation and submission.

Two great powers emerged out of World War II: the Soviet Union and the United States. Historians continue to debate the origins of the Cold War that followed. How much was due to Stalin's intransigence and belligerency? How much to blind anti-Communism on the part of American leaders? What's clear is that among a significant portion of the anticolonial leadership in the less-developed world, choosing the Marxist-Leninist model of imposing industrialization and modernization through central planning and one-party control seemed more viable than following the capitalist road. The victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949 put the world's most populous nation under the rule of Mao Zedong, a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist who set out in as short a time as possible to make the People's Republic the equal of the two superpowers—an ambition embodied in the cruelly named "Great Leap Forward."

As chronicled by Yang Jisheng, a long-time reporter for China's official news agency, the Great Leap Forward pulled the country into an abyss of mass starvation and death. Jisheng recognizes his own complicity in the cover-up that followed. He didn't question the Communist Party's version of events—in which his own father perished—until, disillusioned by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, he set out to unearth the truth behind the famine of 1958–61. The resulting book, *Tombstone*, is a highly detailed, two-volume account (the English version has been edited into a single volume) intended by Jisheng as a memorial to his father—a "tombstone in my heart," he writes—and to the millions of other victims.

Jisheng demolishes the notion that bad weather, tight global grain markets, or the withdrawal of Soviet advisers contributed to the deaths of 30 million people, and lays the blame squarely on Mao. A megalomaniacal tyrant who envisioned his rule as a marriage, in his own words, of "Marx with [the ancient emperor] Qin Shi-huang," Mao used the Great Leap Forward to gather the peasantry into military-style communes, turning the Chinese countryside into a gigantic barracks. Civil society was abolished. The family was done away with. Every aspect of life and work was regimented by the state. The people were to be created anew.

Ideological rigidity and economic fantasy produced collective insanity. When Beijing issued quotas, which local officials met and exceeded by requisitioning every ounce of grain, officials then set new and higher quotas. Communal kitchens, inefficient to begin with, became hopelessly undersupplied. An utterly unrealistic plan for spurring local steel production led to communes melting down whatever was at hand—cooking implements, ploughs, temple bells, etc. When the true effects of the catastrophe grew evident, Mao denounced "right-deviationist thinking" among naysayers and subversives, and unleashed a wave of violent repression.

Jisheng's chronicle of the suffering that flowed from Mao's orders insistently recounts the mind-numbing particulars of how many died, where, and how. "The labor reform team of the Zhongba administrative district," *Tombstone* tells us, "included an eleven-year-old girl named Chen Yuxiu, who was forced to work for five straight days and nights. She collapsed, bleeding from the nose and mouth, and ultimately died." In the details of suffering, all famines are, finally, alike. Mao's Chinese victims underwent the same gruesome physical ravages John Kelly describes among the Irish: "the eyelids inflame; the angular lines around the mouth deepen into cavities; the swollen thyroid gland becomes tumor-sized; fields of white fungus cover the tongue, blistering mouth sores develop, the skin acquires the texture of parchment; teeth decay and fall out, gums ooze pus, and a long silky growth of hair covers the face." The suffering continues among the survivors in weakened bones, damaged hearts, haunted memories, and multi-generational psychological effects. Studies done after the Second World War indicate that, when subject to malnutrition and starvation in the womb, children were born with a predisposition to schizophrenia and psychotic depression. The repercussions, reports Lizzie Collingham, "are still echoing down through the generations, into the present day."

Whether adherents of Marxism, the Manchester School, or National Socialism, in both war and peace those in charge of modern famines agreed that it was the victims who were at fault. Irish peasants were lazy and superstitious; Ukrainian kulaks, greedy and reactionary; Slavs and Jews, filthy *untermenschen*; Bengalese, chronic overbreeders. In the eyes of the Japanese, Chinese peasants were incorrigible and primitive; in Mao's view, they were "regressionists" who lacked "adequate psychological preparation for socialist revolution." Progress, however defined, depended on removing the human impediments that stood in its way.

Except in rogue states like North Korea, the era of employing hunger as an instrument of social engineering seems to have run its course. Yet hunger and malnutrition continue to be matters of worldwide concern; indeed, millions of people still exist on the cusp of starvation. Global warming and climate change seem certain to exacerbate this situation and lead to upheavals in the supply and distribution of the world's food resources. What remains to be seen is whether, as a global community of 9 billion people and counting, we will cope with those changes in a way that enables us to prevent mass hunger—or, instead, continue to put ideology ahead of individuals and play new and ghastly versions of the same old games. ∎