

# MODERN FAMINE THEORY AND THE STUDY OF PRE-MODERN FAMINES

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Modern thinkers writing about famine have been quite adept and imaginative in developing their understanding of famines, their causes and structures. However, medieval scholars have tended not to engage strongly with this wider contemporary literature. The last major discussion of theories surrounding food shortage, eventually enshrined as *The Brenner Debate*, drew strong lines between neo-Malthusian and Marxist efforts to understand the economic and agricultural crises of the fourteenth century. Both neo-Malthusian ideas of overpopulation and land exhaustion and Marxist explanations of exploitative class power and stagnant or “stuck” methods of agricultural production have undergone significant revision in the contemporary literature. However, the central question of the Brenner debate was not the cause of famine, but rather the source of Europe’s enduring economic strength after the Black Death and their ultimate turn to more capitalist modes of production throughout the early-modern period.<sup>1</sup> In the years following the republication of these articles in book form in 1987, Marxist interpretations have waned, leaving neo-Malthusian understanding as the central model for the understanding of famines throughout the medieval period, a model often imported to other times and places where there appears little evidence for its application.<sup>2</sup> The application of the Neo-Malthusian model to the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries might provide a plausible explanation for the economic stagnation of northern Europe in the decades before the Black Death. However, it is an incomplete explanation of European famines during the time period (most notably the “Great Famine” of 1315-1317) and it cannot serve as a strong explanation for often wide spread famines in other centuries.<sup>3</sup>

In 1981, five years after the publication of Brenner’s original article but before the publication of his final response and its subsequent publication in book form, Amartya Sen put forward what remains to this day the most far-reaching revision of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> This focus is made clear in Brenner’s own final essay; Robert BRENNER, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism”, *The Brenner Debate: agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe*, T. H. ASTON and C. H. E. PHILPIN (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 213 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Similar structures of overpopulation have been used for the Byzantine Empire by: Dionysios Ch STATHAKOPOULOS, *Famine and pestilence in the late Roman and early Byzantine empire: a systematic survey of subsistence crises and epidemics*, London, Ashgate Publishing, 2004, p. 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> Recent work, often by authors who also appear in this volume, has begun to address other potential “European wide” or broad regional famines that occurred during times of low population, either in earlier centuries, during a time when Europeans were still cutting down large amounts of forest and converting it into new farmland, or after the Black Death in a time of falling population levels. See Pere BENITO i MONCLÚS, “Fams i caresties a la Mediterrània occidental durant la baixa edat mitjana: el debat sobre “les crisis de la crisi”, *Recerques: Història, economia i cultura*, 49 (Barcelona, 2004), p. 179-193; and Adam FRANKLIN-LYONS, *Famine – preparation and response in Catalonia after the Black Death*, Doctoral Dissertation, New Haven, Yale University, 2009.

understandings of the nature of famine.<sup>4</sup> Sen's original text, *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, attempts to reformulate famine and food shortage not as a drop in the quantity of food, *per se*, but rather as a drop in the ability of certain people to "command" food.<sup>5</sup> In Sen's model, certain members of a population could be short of food or starving while the region or nation still produces or imports sufficient calories to feed everyone. However, if a given person or even whole classes of people do not have the necessary capacity or influence to acquire food, they can still starve. This approach allows Sen to include issues of economics and governmental policy in a forceful way but draws finer distinctions than the earlier Marxists class-based readings. While there are many critics of Sen in the modern debate, the *Essay on Entitlement* has become one of the starting points for the discussions of contemporary food crises, just as the Brenner Debate was the starting point for medievalists until quite recently.

Despite Sen's long shadow in the modern debates about food supply, his work has found much less application in the pre-modern world. Part of the cause is the focus of most medieval research on the beginning of the fourteenth century, a time period when the overpopulation explanation seems most relevant. Another aspect of the hesitancy derives from a reluctance to apply economic theories developed for use in the highly integrated production and distribution markets of the modern world to a distant and much more economically fragmented past. However, despite the need to adapt some of Sen's ideas to function better within the very different economic spaces of Medieval Europe, there are many ways in which such contemporary ideas can be useful to the study of the past. Moreover, some of Sen's modern critics and commentators, including Stephen Devereux, Meghnad Desai, Amrita Rangasami and Alex de Wall provide revisions or expansions to the entitlement approach that make the system much more applicable to the pre-modern world. The use and understanding of these contemporary theories should be important to the study of medieval food supply, not because our studies should necessarily be more theorized, but rather because our theories and understandings of theory govern both how we read source and what sources we choose when seeking to describe and analyze medieval food shortages. I believe that the work of the commentators listed above can help provide a fuller explanation for the causes and course of medieval food shortages, and can push medievalists to read old sources differently as well as begin to read sources not previously included in the study of famine.

## **1. FED [Food Entitlement Decline] versus FAD [Food Availability Decline]**

One of the primary complaints logged against Sen's entitlement approach, and a major impediment to its application to pre-modern times, claims that most or all famines are, in fact, what Sen calls "Food-Availability Decline" [referred to as FAD] famines

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<sup>4</sup> Brenner's original article, Robert BRENNER, "Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe", *Past & Present*, 70 (Oxford, 1976), p. 30-74. Responses by scholars like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Guy Bois and others appeared in *Past and Present* in 1978 and 1979. After a further article from Brenner himself in 1982, "The agrarian roots of European capitalism", *Past & Present*, 97 (Oxford, 1982), p. 16-113, the entire collection was published in 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Amartya SEN, *Poverty and famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 8.

rather than “Food-Entitlement Decline” [referred to as FED] famines.<sup>6</sup> Hence, any famine in which the overall quantity of food actually declined due to drought or flood could not usefully be studied using the Entitlement method. However, this should not be an impediment. As Stephen Devereux has pointed out, this claim is based on the assumption that any FAD famine is by definition not an FED event – that they are “non-nested alternatives.”<sup>7</sup> However, the entitlement approach can be split into two claims, one of which is susceptible to this attack, the other of which is not. In Sen’s original formulation, he spends only a portion of the work detailing the differences between availability versus entitlement; he then spends nearly half the work looking at several major famines of the twentieth century from Bengal, Bangladesh, the Sahel and Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup> The initial description only claims that the entitlement approach is a better method for understanding the structure and course of a famine; the famine examples claim to demonstrate instances in which Entitlement Decline is the root or even the sole cause of food shortages. Whether or not availability decline occurs in any given food shortage event can be hotly debated and has been so for a number of modern famines. However, the entitlement approach provides a useful tool for understanding who better maintains their access to food and who loses out in the face of a real shortage.

The description of the causative and explanatory roles FED can play were published simultaneously by two different famine scholars in 1988, David Arnold and Meghnad Desai. Arnold states, “It must be doubted whether Sen has really provided a theory of famine causation, as he contends..., so much as given an explanation of how famines develop once they have (for whatever reason), been set in motion.”<sup>9</sup> Desai described the entitlement approach as “demolishing one after another of the monocausal arguments about famines. Thus, for example, droughts and such other extreme natural events are also neither necessary nor sufficient. Famines have occurred with and without FAD, with and without the food grain prices rising, and with and without natural disasters occurring.”<sup>10</sup> More recently, Stephen Devereux has provided a useful way of resolving these differences. Taking a “taxonomic” approach, he proposes to identify:

some famines as clearly triggered by FAD (old style droughts or floods), others by exchange entitlement decline (where food supplies are adequate but certain groups face catastrophic collapses in their access to food) and others by political crisis (unfavorable or hostile government policies, conflict and war, failures of international response). In every case, however, identifying the trigger does not

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<sup>6</sup> Cormac O’Grada has also made this claim for both earlier famines, as well as citing studies that do the same for some of the modern famines studied by Sen himself; Cormac O’GRADA, *Black ’47 and beyond: the great Irish famine in history, economy, and memory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 122-126; and Cormac O’GRADA, *Famine: a short history*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 190ff. O’Grada does consistently portray FAD as opposing in cause and approach to FED.

<sup>7</sup> Martin RAVALLION, *Famines and economics*, New York, World Bank Policy Research Department, 1996, p. 7; see also Stephen DEVEREUX, “Sen’s entitlement approach: critiques and counter-critiques”, *Oxford Development Studies*, 29:3 (Oxford, 2001), p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> A. SEN, *Poverty and famines*, ch. 6-9.

<sup>9</sup> Martin ARNOLD, *Famine: social crisis and historical change*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, p. 44-45. See also, Meghnad DESAI, “The economics of famine”, G. AINSWORTH HARRISON, (ed.), *Famine*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 109-110.

<sup>10</sup> M. DESAI, “Economics of famine”, p. 109.

explain the famine, which requires a more complex analysis of conjunctural triggers and structural or underlying causes of famines.”<sup>11</sup>

Taking the FED approach as describing not the primary cause or trigger of the famine but rather the structures through which famine is directed once it begins makes the entitlement approach directly applicable to the study of any famine, including those of medieval Europe where adverse weather is most frequently the initiator of food shortage.

As noted above, the debate between entitlement and availability is often couched in terms of a question of causality. Desai argues that FED strongly supports a multi-causal understanding of Famine. This idea has been expanded by the famine scholar Alex De Waal who, in part drawing on Lawrence Stone’s work on revolutions, charts a three tiered system of famine causation divided into long-term causes (climate change, population movement), medium-term (changes in government or economy, social instability) and triggers (drought, war). FAD generally only refers to a trigger event but does not provide the mechanism that FED does for understanding the other two causal levels. Mapping entitlements for individuals or classes of people as best as we are able moves the scholarly vision away from trigger events and focuses work on medium term causes such as economic conditions and political power.

What, then, can entitlements tell us that is new about the medieval experience of famine? First, using entitlements moves us beyond looking at why people starved and instead asks who starved and why. Additionally, entitlements are more functional than the earlier Marxist interpretation, since they take individuals into consideration and ask questions of general food access regardless of specific wealth or class. For example, a poor farmer on a small plot may actually fare better in a given crisis than a relatively wealthy herder or owner of livestock. Hence entitlements also allow us to better evaluate the impact of famines on wealthier individuals rather than assuming that greater wealth will allow greater resistance to famine. Perhaps obviously, the uses of entitlements in medieval history vary with the sources available. Though virtually every individual might have a different set of entitlements, entitlement maps will look very different in rural areas and in urban areas, so I will address each in turn. After providing this rough chart of food entitlements in the medieval world, I will discuss some of the preliminary studies that cover these topics.

## **2. Entitlements in Rural Areas.**

Sen delineated four major forms of entitlement. First, exchange entitlements represent a person’s economic capacity to trade or purchase food; this form is the most common in much of the modern world. The second, “direct” entitlements, involve any capacity an individual has for growing and harvesting his own food. The third form involves the right of every individual to the labor of his own body and the exchange entitlements he can gain through work. Finally, “transfer” entitlements involve movement

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<sup>11</sup> S. DEVEREUX, “Sen’s entitlement approach”, p. 248. The language of underlying causes versus “triggers” has also been used by Desai, “Economics of famine”, p. 128-129. See also, Stephen DEVEREUX, *The new famines: why famines persist in an era of globalization*, New York, Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 67-70.

of goods through mechanisms such as inheritance or gifts.<sup>12</sup> During the Middle Ages, what Sen refers to as “direct” or “production” entitlements – agricultural harvests or animal husbandry – clearly dominated for most of the population.

However, within the variety of forms of servitude and payments made by peasants and serfs, we can ask if these differing forms of economic relationships produced different entitlements. Lordships held in urban areas often converted their holdings into monetized rentals earlier than rural lordships. If a peasant had to pay his rent in cash rather than in kind, then a harvest shortfall might represent less of a difficulty since high prices would allow for access to the same amount of money from a smaller percentage of the harvest. Did the peasants on lands already converted to monetary payments fair better in times of shortage? Also, despite the prevalence of auto-consumption and peasant labor, wage labor still existed in rural areas throughout the late middle ages. Often labor payments included not only money, but also meals while on the job. The meals varied with both the difficulty of the labor as well as with the quality of the harvest, but did not necessarily disappear during famines. Did regions in which workers were not paid in food demonstrate greater migration or have more suffering amongst this particular group? Did the presence of a payment in kind help agricultural laborers’ real wages to remain high as opposed to artisanal wages?<sup>13</sup> Additionally, this form of entitlement, where it existed, might also place women and children of laborers at a greater disadvantage since the worker himself would be fed while his family might survive on less.<sup>14</sup> Finally, we can investigate the role of cash cropping in relation to a farmer or peasant’s entitlements. Virtually all areas of Europe had possible cash crops or land uses that could replace cereals; some crops could be both important foods as well as marketable – wine, oil, orchards – while others had little or no caloric value – saffron, wool, silk.<sup>15</sup> Generally, cash crops reduce famine resistance since price spikes in staple grains often correspond to price slumps in other products; this would mean that even as food became more expensive, the cash crop would fall in value, resulting in a double loss. However, a moderate level of lucrative cash cropping might have enabled easier payments of rent while reserving larger amounts of land for cereal cultivation. All of these instances and questions could help illuminate the course famine takes in medieval society by tracing the economic options available to individuals to command grain.

Entitlement maps also help clarify the impact of food shortages on lords or other landholders such as monasteries. Often based on similar agricultural choices – cash crops versus grain crops, reliance on herding, long term capital improvements like irrigation – the fate of land owners in famine periods depends on an interchange of choices made that determine their overall entitlement structure. Just as peasants who pay in cash might find benefit during times of high grain prices, landowners experience the opposite, as fixed cash payments fall in their overall purchasing power. Though not often at risk of outright

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<sup>12</sup> This description of Sen’s thinking is a mere sketch of the depth of his ideas. Since his theories are so well known, I will not go into a complete summary here. A. SEN, *Poverty and famines*, p. 2ff.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance: Meghnad DESAI, “The agrarian crisis in Medieval England: A Malthusian tragedy or a failure of entitlements?”, *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 43:3 (London, 1991), p. 240-241.

<sup>14</sup> The different experiences of famine based on gender and age is also a frequent problem in modern crises. See M. ARNOLD, *Famine: social crisis and historical change*, p. 86-95; and C. O’GRADA, *Famine: A short history*, p. 98-102.

<sup>15</sup> Not all types of land were equally suited to all crops, so some of these items, particularly wool or wine, could also have been used to produce profit from land not well suited to heavy cropping in staple foods.

starvation, these patterns of ownership and use can determine the difference between minor hardship and impoverishment. Tracing the entitlement of landholders also necessarily applies to smaller landlords who might respond to a crisis with the same attitude as a lord but come from the same class as a peasant. As mentioned above, these ideas allow for descriptions of agricultural production and land ownership not based simply on a class model or a population model. Legal structures and economic practices determine a person's survival in times of food shortage better than simply their class or general wealth. Each lordship or monastery will have a different experience than will the peasants under their control depending on their customary rights, the variety of their resources and the agricultural choices they engage in all of which are better understood as entitlements to food, even when those entitlements include a majority of direct access to land and its yields.

### **3. Entitlements in Urban Areas.**

One prominent question about food shortages that I believe can only be adequately addressed using the entitlement method is how the course of famines and the level of suffering differed between urban and rural areas. Early on, cities began using legal and diplomatic means to protect the shipping lanes that would keep their markets supplied with grain. By the late-thirteenth century, these legal controls often represented the primary means of maintaining city entitlements. The effective control of food entitlements shifted away from the "direct" production entitlements of the countryside towards the legal and economic "exchange" entitlements of the city. While both continued to exist, it is an important marker of the development of the medieval economy when the political control cities exerted over their food supplies became strong enough to trump the more immediate utility of local food production. This observation leads to several questions that could merit further study. At what point do urban entitlements begin to trump rural entitlements? What forms of legal control make this possible? It is also possible that these new market demands and controls helped to reduce the overall effectiveness of rural entitlement systems; as noted above, cash crop production, inspired by increasing monetization and urban market influence, might often prove destructive for rural farmers in times of shortage.

The well-known set of urban legal controls enacted in times of shortage could also serve to exacerbate famine. Understood in an entitlement context, export bans appear as a form of official hoarding. Even as officials rail against "illegal" hoarding – personal control of food resources for personal gain, the city engages in a legal and bureaucratic form of resource control designed to benefit its citizens often at the expense of neighboring towns. Such protective measures can both make famines worse and help their spread. This form of famine spread does create a real possibility of a FED only shortage in medieval Europe. Cities, already reliant on imports, can choose to exercise political influence, funneling grain away from their weaker neighbors and potentially wresting enough grain from other areas to produce new shortages in zones with normal harvests. Whatever the initial trigger of the shortage, the final topography of the famine follows political lines made clearer through the following of entitlements. Cities relying largely on exchange entitlements make possible this sort of man-made shortage even in

the late medieval period, a type of crisis that is increasingly common in the modern world with the continuous possibility of large scale and long distance commerce.

Additionally, as this shift towards urban control changed the entitlement map, it also changed the production demography. More and more people were consuming more and more resources produced by a shrinking percentage of the overall population. Certainly rural producers remained more numerous for centuries, but the balance between the two tipped perceptibly between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries. In the social chaos following the Black Death, migration tended to be predominantly rural people moving towards urban areas. Despite the slump in population, the demands of the poor did not manifest themselves as desire for more land, but rather for the economic control represented by the city. In this view, following medieval peoples' own perceptions of economic access and ultimately daily entitlements, the rural overpopulation of the late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century appear more as a loss of rural entitlements and a corresponding gain in urban entitlements.

Another important entitlement transfer away from the rural world toward the late-medieval city comes from their increasingly extensive practices of poor relief. Over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, poor relief moved away from monastic institutions – as likely rural as urban – and towards large city based hospitals. By the fourteenth centuries, hospitals founded by wealthy laymen, also usually urban, began to rival the religious institutions in size. The wealth of the hospitals derived almost entirely from “transfer” entitlements, usually in the form of bequests or donations from wealthy lords, merchants, or urban artisans. These entitlements, in turn, use the rents of their rural patrimony to create new gift entitlements for certain of the urban poor. By restricting entry to the hospitals to only citizens and using rural rents to maintain their capital and food supplies, during the last centuries of the medieval period these institutions functioned to drain rural resources towards the urban poor, constituting a strong gift entitlement available only to urban citizens. These new forms of entitlement for the destitute, as well as the increasing urban legal control exercised over all exchange entitlements probably help to explain the migration vector pointed heavily towards urban areas during food shortages. People intuitively understood where the stronger entitlements had shifted, despite the fact that food production and direct entitlements remained based in the countryside.

Some of the ideas of one of Sen's earliest critics, Amrita Rangasami, can help to provide new questions about these medieval urban entitlements. Rangasami has argued that the Entitlement approach does not go far enough in describing the beginnings of famine and instead prefers to delineate three phases of a famine: “dearth,” “famishment,” and “famine.” Rangasami claims that previous writers, including Sen himself, only describe famine in terms of mortality, paying little or no attention to early and often persistent forms of suffering associated with even mild food shortage. For Rangasami, this division serves to highlight two important features of famines. First, that while entitlements might explain better why not every harvest shortfall becomes a famine, they do not explain why famines become persistent or more frequent in certain areas. Second, these stages also involve the transfer of wealth and goods “...from victim to beneficiary”.<sup>16</sup> That famines themselves involve long term underlying causes should not

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<sup>16</sup> Amrita RANGASAMI, “Failure of exchange entitlements theory of famine 1”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20:41 (Mumbai, 1985), p. 1748.

be surprising to historians. Indeed, the argument of overpopulation during the first half of the fourteenth century describes exactly an underlying condition that makes famine both more frequent and more severe.

However, we can also question the role that cities played in making famine more persistent. As noted above, does the shift in demographics, regardless of overall population level, make famines more likely throughout the late medieval period? Do the new legal controls over grain created by urban areas provide new “beneficiaries” of famine at the expense of the rural world?<sup>17</sup> The persistence of famines, particularly in the Mediterranean, supports this reinterpretation of late-medieval famine causality. The occurrence of regional famines does seem to pick up in the early fourteenth century, but the Black Death does not effectively prevent new famines from occurring; there is a brief pause from 1348 till the 1370’s, but thereafter major famines occur more or less every decade. If the most important underlying cause of increasing famine frequency and severity was overpopulation, one would expect major shortages to taper off after the Black Death, but this is not so. New work on medieval famines should begin to develop a typology or structure of famine that has equal explanatory power in different times and places and that is less reliant on the attractive simplicity of overpopulation and harvest failure. The use of entitlement theory as well as other contemporary work on famine can provide an important step in this direction.

#### 4. Previous Scholarship

Some of these ideas have already been taken up by medieval historians, though not always in a systematic way, and rarely making direct use of the work of the scholars cited here. As noted at the beginning, the Brenner debate and the subsequent triumph of neo-Malthusianism now largely rule in both textbook descriptions and much scholarly work on both medieval famine and the economy. However, there remain a few notable exceptions. Peter Garnsey, a classicist, employs the most systematic use of these ideas in his work. Already in his earlier book on famines in classical Greece and Rome, he works with a fairly sophisticated set of questions and structures.<sup>18</sup> In his more recent studies, he describes a “food crisis continuum,” where each shortage or harvest failure exists somewhere on the line between minor crisis and major famine, allowing him to discuss all such events in a comparable way. Designing this definition, he references Sen and makes extensive use of the ideas of Alex De Waal attempting to redefine contemporary famines in Africa.<sup>19</sup> Garnsey makes excellent use of these theories, despite the even more

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<sup>17</sup> Some studies from Catalonia demonstrate how the importation of foodstuffs in times of shortage often came at significant financial benefit to the law makers and their merchant allies: Núria CANYELLES VILAR, “L’any de la fam al camp de Tarragona (1374-1376)”, Antoni RIERA I MELIS and Maria BARCELÓ CRESPI (eds.), *La Mediterrània, àrea de convergència de sistemes alimentaris: XIV Jornades d’Estudis Històrics Locals*, Palma de Mallorca, Institut d’Estudis Baleàrics, 1996, p. 263-281; and José Maria CRUSELLES GÓMEZ, Enrique CRUSELLES, and Rafael NARBONA, “El sistema de abastacimiento frumentario de la ciudad de Valencia en el siglo XV: entre la subvención pública y el negocio privado”, *Ibidem*, p. 305-32.

<sup>18</sup> Peter GARNSEY, *Famine and food supply in the Graeco-Roman world: responses to risk and crisis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 3-40.

<sup>19</sup> The work and ideas proposed here owe something of a debt to Garnsey and could be seen as attempting to take his lead in formulating questions for the medieval period. Peter GARNSEY and Walter SCHEIDEL,



limited source base in the classical world. In reading chronicle evidence, his use of De Waal's ideas is especially compelling.

Amongst medievalists, some of these topics have been touched on, sometimes even directly, though never to the extent or precision of Peter Garnsey. In William Chester Jordan's work, *The Great Famine*, he begins with the theories from the Brenner debate, but then uses the work of David Arnold more extensively for developing his new sets of questions. In particular, Jordan draws on Arnold's discussion of the functions of food shortage in peasant societies. Despite the fact that Arnold writes positively about the entitlement approach, Jordan does not adopt the theory in his work, though he does write with awareness of the importance of political power and economic capacity on the practices of food distribution and the structures of famine.<sup>20</sup>

One essay published not by a medievalist but by Meghnad Desai, the famine economist mentioned above, attempts to redefine the economic hardships during the first half of the fourteenth century as not overpopulation but distinctly as entitlement crises. He describes the Malthusian argument of Michael Postan and Jan Z. Titow as relying on a "an assumption that England was a one-good Ricardian economy of breathtaking simplicity."<sup>21</sup> He believes, rather, that the presence of the wool trade and other options of production always allowed for more dynamic economic options in rural areas. Additionally, the interchange of animal epidemics and harvest failures in the early fourteenth century would have hit sheep farmers hardest (as both reliant on animal based income, but also as purchasers of grain – exchange entitlements – rather than producers – direct entitlements).<sup>22</sup> Finally, he argues that the combination of cattle disease and harvest failure produced both a food shortage and a capital shortage that resulted in the "crisis of tenancy" seen in Postan's heriot data, rather than any actual shortage of arable land or excess of population.

Desai believes that the complexities of the English countryside, in which certain areas suffered and others did not, cannot be adequately captured by a Neo-Malthusian reading, but are best understood by creating an entitlement map and using the methods described by Sen. While Desai mentions that he discussed his work directly with Postan, one of the originators of the overpopulation thesis, he states that he was unable to convince Postan of his point of view and his article remains relatively uncited.<sup>23</sup> One possible reason for this inattention is that while the methodology of the piece is new, the sources are not. Since Desai is not himself a medievalist, he relied entirely on the data from the work of Postan and Titow themselves, as well as on portions of the important article by Ian Kershaw.<sup>24</sup> While compelling in its methodology and arguments, in the end,

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*Cities, peasants and food in classical antiquity: essays in social and economic history*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 272ff.

<sup>20</sup> M. ARNOLD, *Famine: social crisis and historical change*, 47ff. William Chester JORDAN, *The great famine: northern Europe in the early fourteenth century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> M. DESAI, "The agrarian crisis in Medieval England", p. 224; for the original works, see Michael M. POSTAN and Jan Z. TITOW, "Heriots and prices on Winchester manors", *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, XI (London, 1958-59), p. 393-411; and Jan Z. TITOW, *Winchester yields*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> M. DESAI, "The agrarian crisis in Medieval England", p. 250-252.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>24</sup> Ian KERSHAW, "The Great Famine and agrarian crisis in England, 1315-1322", *Past & Present*, 59 (Oxford, 1973), p. 3-50.

the article functions better as a critique of Postan than as a new methodology for the study of medieval famine.

Finally, several of the authors in this volume have addressed some of these questions in their previous work. Pere Benito has done work demonstrating the role of economic panic in spreading famines to new areas, as well as looked at the characteristics of societies in which famines are a persistent problem. Some of his recent work has also tried to look more systematically at the definition and understanding of famine used in medieval chronicles, not unlike the work cited by Peter Garnsey above. Another important aspect of Benito's work has been to identify characteristics of famines in eras far removed from the fourteenth century and its close affinity with overpopulation.<sup>25</sup> Work on the economies of Mediterranean cities has also been extensive, often citing the strong political role played by maintaining control over grain importation. However, famines are often a secondary question of these studies and, as such, are not concerned with figuring out who suffered and how, but rather the role of political elites and their relation to emerging city markets.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Since the late 1980's and early 1990's, the reclassification of famines as "complex disasters" has spurred the search for political, economic, and social theories to help to explain their causes and ultimately support better efforts at prevention or response. The study of modern famine has been heavily based on theory specifically because famines are understood to be complex disasters – neither their causes nor their solutions are as straightforward as responses to floods, earthquakes or other natural disasters. Indeed, in modern descriptions the term famine is reserved for those times of starvation when no clear cause is at hand, or, better, when the causes deeply implicate the actions of cultures, governments and the people themselves.<sup>27</sup> This category of disaster usually includes famines as well as types of civil strife and civil war, which differ from natural disasters in that "complex emergencies have a singular ability to erode or destroy the cultural, civil, political and economic integrity of established societies. They attack

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<sup>25</sup> Pere BENITO i MONCLÚS, "Carestía y hambruna en las ciudades de occidente durante la Edad Media: algunos rasgos distintivos," Beatriz ARÍZAGA BOLUMBURU and Jesús Ángel SOLÓRZANO TELECHEA (ed.), *Alimentar la ciudad en la Edad Media: Nájera, Encuentros Internacionales del Medioevo 2008*, Nájera, Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2009, p. 299-314; *Idem*, "'Et si sterilitas, ut solet, in terra illa fuerit...': frecuencia, longevidad y gravedad de las carestías en Cataluña durante la 'fase del crecimiento' de la economía medieval (siglos XI-XIII)", Hipólito Rafael OLIVA HERRER and Pere BENITO i MONCLÚS (ed.), *Crisis de subsistencia y crisis agrarias en la Edad Media*, Sevilla, Universidad de Sevilla, 2007, p. 79-110; *Idem*, "Famines sans frontières en Occident avant la 'conjoncture de 1300'. À propos d'une enquête en cours", Monique BOURIN, John DRENDEL and François MENANT (ed.), *Les disettes dans la conjoncture de 1300 en Méditerranée Occidentale*, Roma, École Française de Rome, 2012, p. 36-87.

<sup>26</sup> Among many such studies, see Antoni RIERA i MELIS, "Crisis frumentarias y políticas municipales de abastecimiento en las ciudades catalanas durante la Baja Edad Media", *Crisis de subsistencia y crisis agrarias en la Edad Media*, p. 125-160; Albert CURTO i HOMEDES, *La intervenció municipal en l'abastament de blat d'una ciutat catalana: Tortosa, segle XIV*, Barcelona, Fundació Salvador Vives Casajuana, 1988.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander DE WAAL, *Famine that kills: Darfur, Sudan*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 9ff; David KEEN, *Complex emergencies*, London, Polity Press, 2008, p. 1ff.

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social systems and networks.”<sup>28</sup> The search for better theories is directly predicated on the search for better responses and the prevention of human suffering.

For pre-modern historians, the use of theory also remains important. In Jordan’s book on the Great Famine, he states that famine theory “encourages a systematic and comprehensive set of questions on the subject of famine. It may have been possible to generate the questions without resort to the models, but this is doubtful.”<sup>29</sup> For a concrete example, Jordan points to earlier studies that are “seduced by chronicle evidence into believing that the Great Famine of the Middle Ages was solely a production crisis...” ignoring “other possible factors, like war and government policies.”<sup>30</sup> The use of theory in medieval history might be less immediate than the development of theory today; as Peter Garnsey sardonically notes, “We are not ‘disaster visitors’ who, for better or for worse, will decide the fate of Sudanese or Ethiopians.”<sup>31</sup> However, continuing a dialogue with contemporary work on famines can only expand the questions we bring to the source base as well as make our work more relevant to the theorists on whom we often rely for new ideas.

The entitlement approach and its recent developments and expansions greatly expand our current range of questions. Understanding famine as a complex disaster with multiple tiers of causation – triggers, medium and long-term causes – allows us to compare events across centuries as well as identify persistent patterns in the medieval response to food shortage. Entitlements refocus attention on the medium-term, human causes of famine, which still existed and played a strong role in the character of medieval food shortage, despite the more prominent position of triggers like drought or flood in the medieval imagination. Understanding FED as a tool and a generator of questions rather than as solely a cause of famines makes it easier to apply to pre-modern history.

The studies referenced above contribute a great deal to our understanding of the medieval food supply system and its controls, but we have, as yet, no satisfactory anatomy of famines or set of tools useful for understanding food shortage in a general context. Despite the importance of Jordan’s book on the Great Famine, the author himself acknowledges that it is about a particular set of circumstances and does not necessarily apply to all famines, let alone other centuries of the medieval era. Conferences and publications such as this book represent the continuing work of scholars to understand the complexities of famine over the course of the medieval timespan. As a contribution to these efforts towards a more generalized understanding of medieval famine, I believe that the Entitlement approach and the questions laid out in this essay can help to develop these methods and provide a more systematic study of medieval food crises.

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<sup>28</sup> Mark DUFFIELD, “Complex emergencies and the crisis of developmentalism”, *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, 25:4 (London, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> W. JORDAN, *The great famine*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> P. GARNSEY and W. SCHEIDEL, *Cities, peasants and food*, p. 280. The reference to “disaster visitors” is from the idea of “disaster tourism” coined in Alex DE WAAL, *Famines that Kill*, p. 20; a work that Garnsey adapts and generally finds quite useful for the understanding of ancient crises.