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Hunger: a Modern History

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James Vernon
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The request to review Professor James Vernon?s book brings to mind John Betjeman?s verses in the style of George R. Sims:

> It?s an easy game this reviewin??the editor sends yer a book,
> Yer puts it down on yer table and yer gives it a ?asty look,
> An? then, Sir, yer writes about it as though yer ?ad read it all through,
> And if ye?re a pal o? the author yer gives it a good review.(1)

Betjeman?s verse does not fit the circumstances of this review but associating George R. Sims with a book on hunger is highly appropriate, for Sims?s most famous line: ?It is Christmas Day in the Workhouse?, showed him to be a man deeply concerned about social justice but not one who required such concepts as the ?cultural turn? or the ?imperial turn? for the understanding of hunger (pp. viii?ix). Since James Vernon is a modern cultural historian, he does and, although he offers no definition of hunger, he begins by revealing that he will ?track three great transformations in the modern understanding of hunger ? the divine, the moral, and the social? (p. 2) which he sees occurring between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Limiting the scope of the topic may puzzle readers then faced with the author?s claim that ?I take the nutritional history

of modernity as a given? (p. 4). It is a perplexing statement: is the reader to assume that the author has nothing to add to previously published histories of hunger, or that hunger is anything more than a label to be applied to various aspects of the unfortunate state of poverty in which many people found themselves, or used as a term when claiming relief from destitution? In fact this does not resolve the shifting values of Professor Vernon?s approach to a variety of sources ? ?I follow discussions of hunger? (p. 9) ? or the lack of methodological rigour which is evident in his verbose but superficial style.

The arrangement of the book is mainly thematic, so that while there is a broad chronological development, some overlapping of events in time does occur. Vernon, by the way, appears to be writing about Britain and British society (with allusions to Ireland and the empire) though this is not set out in the preface or first chapter, which starts on 11 September 2001 in the United States. The second chapter ?The humanitarian discovery of hunger? begins in the 1830s and 1840s and ends in the early 1900s with accounts of overseas famines. Chapter three ?Hunger as political critique? begins at the Great Exhibition and also ends before the First World War but the introduction of the hunger strike takes the author into the 1920s, 1930s and even into the 1940s. The fourth chapter, ?The science and calculation of hunger? begins in the 1830s and ends in the 1930s and 1940s, as does chapter five ?Hungry England and planning for a world of plenty?. However, from chapter six ?Collective feeding and the welfare of society? onwards, the reader is confronted by a considerable change in the author?s approach. Chapter six, and chapter seven, ?You are what you eat? with its sub-title ?Educating the citizen as consumer?, are less about hunger than institutional feeding programmes provided in works canteens, schools, and the introduction of self-service eating places. Domestic science and cookery using new technology ? electricity ? and household management are also introduced in this chapter, leaving chapter eight ?Remembering hunger? and an unnumbered chapter (p. 273) as a ?Conclusion?. The book ends with an extensive set of notes totalling almost 80 pages, yet there is no consolidated bibliography.

The narrative begins with a swift discounting of the historical debate among economic historians during the 1950s and 1960s on the standard of living during the industrialisation of Britain. More significantly, Vernon barely mentions the debate about the nature of hunger, famine and subsistence crises in Britain from the 16th to the 18th centuries that followed from Peter Laslett?s seminal question ?Did the peasants really starve? and led on to the question ?Were ?hunger? rioters really hungry??(2) This is a serious omission. The debate on hunger and famine produced a number of monographs and occupied the pages of *Past and Present* over several years during the 1970s and spread to the *Economic History Review*; it engaged not only demographic historians but also historians of social structure and included specialists on the history of famine such as Professor J. D. Post, Northeastern University, Massachusetts, author of *The Last Great Subsistence Crisis in the Western World*. Post wrote that ?the old biological regime was shattered almost everywhere in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century?, and observed that the last major European subsistence crisis of 1816?7, while causing large-scale mortality on the Continent, had less noticeable effects in Britain. (3)

For ?a modern history? of hunger one might expect this to be Professor Vernon?s starting point. It would provide him with a methodological anchor which his volume lacks. His scant regard for participants in the Industrial Revolution standard of living debate is extended to the succeeding generation of social historians since the 1970s who have examined the nutritional surveys of the late 19th and 20th centuries ?but failed to open up nutritional techniques to historical scrutiny? (p. 6). At such a sweeping generalisation, the reviewer must pause: has the author perhaps not read *The Dietary Surveys of Dr Edward Smith 1862?3* which offered a combined analysis by social historians and a nutritionist? It is a work which enabled a modern nutritional evaluation to be made of hunger during the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1862?3 and later provided a typology of hunger and famine that showed how qualitative terms might be used systematically rather than interchangeably.(4) Actually, opening up ?nutritional techniques to historical scrutiny? shows a remarkable lack of understanding by the author of how other historians have worked in this field in the second half of the 20th century: historians benefit by employing the techniques of other disciplines to obtain greater insight into the past; scrutinising nutritional techniques is not what the historian should do; instead, modern nutritional knowledge should be applied to data from the past. That may lead to a deeper understanding than

can be provided by repeating contemporary opinion. For example, when discussing the Irish famine in chapter two, Vernon quotes from many early works but omits the most modern view which is generally free from the rhetoric generated by previous and more nationalist writers on the Irish famine.(5) Similarly, when Vernon quotes a daily minimum energy requirement of 3,500 calories per day and 125 grams of protein (p. 85) from B. S. Rowntree?s 1899?1901 study of families in York, he adopts the high protein requirements and ?man-values? of the imperialist manpower obsessions current at the beginning of the 20th century and even his later modification of these figures (p. 132) fails to evaluate them in modern terms. Today nutritionists and even informed historians know that ?man-values? underestimated the nutritional needs of women and children and overestimated everyone?s protein requirements. To invoke science without understanding it, reminds this reviewer of the well-known American quantitative historian who faced down the discussion at an anthropometric history seminar in London by saying: ?It all depends which experts you want to believe?. No modern historian should take refuge in such a stance but should understand and be prepared to apply acquired specialist knowledge to historical data. In Vernon?s case, a description of how B. S. Rowntree carried out his nutrition survey is not a substitute for his own nutritional evaluation.

It is equally unclear why in his chapter on ?The science and calculation of hunger? Vernon feels his argument is strengthened by describing scientists? laboratories and equipment, notably at the Rowett Research Institute at Bucksburn near Aberdeen. Since Vernon has not formulated a methodology, the value of these sections is obscure. However, the Rowett, as it is generally known ? officially entitled the Imperial Bureau of Animal Nutrition by the 1920s ? did work in parts of the empire, which provides a link for the author to include inter-war famines, though whatever success the United Kingdom?s nutritionists had overseas in the inter-war years is characterised by the author as occurring in the ?colonial laboratories of South Asia and Africa? and written-off as an ?unfulfilled promise of welfare and development? (p. 277). In addition, Vernon?s view of the relations between science and government is over simplified. He claims that ?nutritionists were welcomed back into the fold at Whitehall? (p. 124) by the Ministry of Health in 1931. A deeper analysis would reveal that they were tolerated not for their knowledge and expertise but only to prevent the Ministry losing control over nutrition and health to the Medical Research Council and the Economic Advisory Council ? a position resulting largely from Sir George Newman?s indolence as Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry which had driven scientists to seek alternative routes to communicate the growing evidence of poor health to the government in the 1920s. Since the Economic Advisory Council had a direct line of communication to the Cabinet, the Ministry of Health felt seriously threatened by the possibility that it could lose an area of departmental policy. Similarly, although Vernon devotes some space to John Boyd Orr?s surveys carried out at the Rowett in the 1920s and 1930s, he suggests that Crawford and Broadley?s market research survey was of more value as it was larger and more geographically representative. Apparently he is not aware of the Rowett Carnegie Survey totalling 7,200 persons in 1937?9.(6)

Professor Vernon is on weak ground when he adopts views that stem from populist beliefs without adequate evidence. For example, he concludes that health in Britain improved in World War II (p. 154). However, in the official history of the National Food Survey, Arnold Baines summarised the years 1945?7, when Britons had suffered six years of restricted food consumption, as a time when adults were losing weight and children?s growth showed some retardation.(7) Similarly, when evaluating Sir John Orr?s post-war world food plan, Vernon leaves out the Labour government?s opposition to Orr?s proposals ? his Fig. 5.3, a David Low cartoon, seems to imply that the United Kingdom supported Orr. In reality, Orr was deeply hurt by Britain?s rejection of his plan, even though it differed from the position of the United States as the major exporter of surplus food.(8) The British government?s opposition to the proposed world food board represented the viewpoint of the food-importing nations. A world food bank, if not actually a monopoly could, by price manipulation, distort the international food trade. This alarmed British officials, reminding them of the unpleasant treatment they had received at the hands of the Combined Food Board in Washington, DC, earlier during the Second World War.

Overall, *Hunger* is a work which seeks to serve a number of different purposes, though Professor Vernon?s intentions and standpoint are not always clear. It is a detailed study based upon extensive reading which, on

reflection, appears to be mainly of a secondary nature. That raises the question of who Professor Vernon expects to benefit from reading his book. Is it more than a very detailed course book for his students in the Centre for British Studies at Berkeley? The Americanisms included in the text may suit Professor Vernon?s students but their inaccuracy is not attractive to an academic audience in Britain: for example, the Rowett Research Institute received considerable funding from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust based in Dunfermline, Fife, not the later-founded Carnegie Corporation with which it is confused throughout the book. Does Professor Vernon desire to integrate historians into the sociological world of labels such as ?the social? (p. 13) derived from post-structural studies? British society has been studied effectively without such jargon both before and since Arendt and Foucault began this misuse of the English language in the 1970s.

Professor Vernon?s account follows his declared standpoint on the political left. It might be difficult to tackle a subject such as hunger without empathy for the hungry. This partiality is maintained through chapter eight and the conclusion to denigrate Britain?s role as an imperial power. It may prove popular in the United States, where foreign policy from August 1945 onwards had an underlying strand of destabilising the United Kingdom?s standing and influence in the world. However, despite the United States being the location of the book?s opening, no further reference is made to the occurrence of hunger in the USA. Indeed, to end his study in the mid-20th century, as the author states is his intention, it is surprising that he offers no wider comment on hunger than that occurring within the British empire. Was there no hunger in modern times in other capitalist countries, such as the United States during the 1930s Depression, or should the book end in the planned economies? Professor Vernon might consider the Soviet famine of the 1930s or what was arguably the world?s greatest famine, that which occurred in China, 1959?61, as fitting for inclusion ? if not the conclusion ? for ?a modern history? of hunger.

Hunger is not the most obvious subject for an author living in the United States or for an American university press to publish. Perhaps, given the book?s price, the publisher assumed that ?hunger? might prove a popular subject for a single-instance study as ?longitude? and ?salt? have previously done; otherwise the price would seem to be exceptionally low. In the American context, the book is incongruous: today the United States is recognised as the most consumption-oriented society in the world and its rates of obesity and Type 2 diabetes are creating major social and health problems approaching epidemic proportions. Furthermore, if Professor Vernon is not above identifying fellow academics as making a ?decent living? out of sociology (p. 14), should he attempt a subject that might be unsavoury to the radical conscience which he at times advertises in this volume? It would not be the first time that academic interest in hunger has attracted opprobrium: in July 1981, a group of economic and social historians met at Vevey, Switzerland, to discuss ?Famine in History? prior to its inclusion in the Eighth International Economic History Association Conference, Budapest, 1982. When news reached *The Guardian*?s ?Diary? column, the paper eagerly published with satirical comment a menu of the meals provided by the symposium?s hosts, Nestlé.

Professor Vernon?s approach to hunger ? dipping into sensational aspects of the subject without a coherent analytical approach ? may not appeal to all, particularly to anyone who has participated in the fieldwork of a nutrition survey in Ethiopia and seen evidence of hunger and even the ever-present precursors of famine at first hand, as this reviewer has. However, perhaps the general reader should turn to George R. Sims for a proper sense of affront.

Notes

1. See *The New Statesman*, 25 October 1968. John Betjeman was reviewing *Prepare to Shed them Now. The Ballads of George R. Sims*. Selected and introduced by A. Calder-Marshall (London, 1968). The quotation is reprinted by kind permission of *The New Statesman*.Back to (1)
2. See P. Laslett, *The World we Have Lost* (London, 1965) ch. five; D. E. Williams, ?Were ?hunger? rioters really hungry?, *Past & Present* 71 (1976), 70?5. ?Famine in History? was also an open forum at the Eighth International Economic History Association Conference, Budapest, 1982.Back to (2)
3. J. D. Post, *The Last Great Subsistence Crisis in the Western World* (Baltimore, 1977), p. 108.Back to (3)

4. T. C. Barker, D. J. Oddy and J. Yudkin, *The Dietary Surveys of Dr Edward Smith 1862?3*, (London, 1970); D. J. Oddy, ?Urban Famine in 19th-century Britain: the effect of the Lancashire Cotton Famine on working-class diet and health?, *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983) 68?86.Back to (4)
5. L. Clarkson and E. M. Crawford, *Feast and Famine: a History of Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920*, (Oxford, 2001).Back to (5)
6. Report to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust from the Rowett Research Institute, *Family Diet and Health in Pre-War Britain*, (Dunfermline, Fife, 1955). This survey was not analysed until after the Second World War.Back to (6)
7. *50 Years of the National Food Survey 1940?90*, ed. J. M. Slater (London, 1991), ch.2.Back to (7)
8. See Lord Boyd Orr, *As I Recall*, (London, 1966), ch.20.Back to (8)

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