

LITTLE DROPS OF WATER: A STORY BY KURT VONNEGUT

HARPER'S

2/JUNE 2009 \$6.95



◆

LET THEM EAT CASH

Can Bill Gates Turn Hunger into Profit?

By Frederick Kaufman

MY GREAT DEPRESSION

Ten Dispatches from the Near Future

Kevin Baker, Thomas de Zengotita, Ruben Bolling, Jamaica Kincaid, Colson Whitehead, Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy, David Rees, Sherman Alexie, Ben Marcus, Ben Katchor

Also: Werner Herzog and Stanley Crouch

◆

LET THEM EAT CASH

Can Bill Gates turn hunger into profit?

By Frederick Kaufman

The latter-day emperors arrived in Rome. Presidents, prime ministers, plutocrats, puppets, dictators, and thugs left their limousines across the street from the Circus Maximus and paraded into the High-Level Conference on World Food Security and the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy. That was quite a bit to consider in one conference, but as the number of starving people on earth rose toward one billion, famine pushed aside all other concerns.

On the first day, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, echoed the wisdom of Thorstein Veblen as he blamed world hunger on "conspicuous consumptions," which have "put all nations in the world on the verge of destruction." Such practices, declared Ahmadinejad, were satanic.

Mahmoud al Habash, the Palestinian minister of agriculture, articulated a different perspective. "The main reason for the world food problem is political," he said. "The rich countries want to control the world." The way to end world hunger, explained al Habash, was to end the occupation of the West Bank.

The Pope sent an envoy with blessings from the Almighty, and a few words of advice. "Feed the hungry," said His Eminence Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

Frederick Kaufman is the author of A Short History of the American Stomach. His last article for Harper's Magazine, "Wasteland," appeared in the February 2008 issue.

During the three days of the hunger summit, more than a thousand reporters filed stories they culled from more than a hundred hunger speeches and hunger news conferences, a vast testament to



the involuntary urge of non-hungry people to say something in the face of hunger, to explicate starvation, to offer a solution. The conference in Rome may have inspired the greatest mass recital of famine narratives in human history, and as I downed my espressos in the mornings before the assembly I'd read the latest installments.

The stories varied in focus and emphasis but employed the same basic plot points: biofuel production, caterpillar plagues, commodity speculation, crop disease, drought, dwindling stock-

piles, fear, flood, hoarding, war, and an increasing world appetite for meat and dairy had bubbled into a nasty poison. Every day, another 25,000 people starved to death or died from hunger-related disease: every four seconds, another corpse. Rising prices for corn, cooking oil, rice, soybeans, and wheat had sparked riots in Bangladesh, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, and nineteen other countries. Not to mention Milwaukee, where a food voucher line of nearly 3,000 people descended into chaos. ("They just went crazy down there," said one witness. "Just totally crazy.")

Oddly enough, almost none of the food riots had emerged from a lack of food. There was plenty of food. The riots had been generated by the lack of money to buy food, and therein lay what may have distinguished today's hunger from the hunger of years past. Therein lay the substance of the Rome conference.

In 1798, Thomas Malthus predicted that population growth would ineluctably outpace food production, a prediction yet to be proven correct. For much of the past century, global crop production has actually outpaced global population growth. Even so, people continue to starve to death.

In 1971, when starving children from Bangladesh to Biafra became the topic of dinner-table conversation across America, 961 million people in the developing world went hungry.

That year, the Rockefeller and Ford foundations had joined forces with the United Nations, the World Bank, and other organizations to fund research in high-yield varieties of rice and wheat; this research, along with expanded use of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and irrigation, and subsequent changes in agricultural methodology—collectively dubbed the Green Revolution—more than doubled cereal production in Asia over the next quarter century. Today, there is enough production capacity to feed the planet—enough, in fact, to feed a planet with double the population.

The world population has, of course, already nearly doubled since 1971, and the proportion of people who are hungry has fallen considerably. Despite the undeniable magnitude of this achievement, the Green Revolution is far from complete. In fact, just two decades after they launched it, the agrocrats were blindsided by an astonishing reversal: the real number of hungry people in the developing world began to climb again, from 823 million in the early 1990s to 907 million in 2008. And since 2003, the overall proportion of hungry people is also on the rise. Which leads to the inevitable conclusion: Malthus was correct to predict that as time went on, more people would starve to death. He just got the mechanism wrong.

Lack of money, not lack of food—that was the new answer, and at the Rome hunger summit, money solutions abounded. Rent support, social security, and subsidized electricity had become part of the debate. One group of delegates advocated price-fixing and tariffs; another argued for free markets and the abolition of tariffs. Decrease exports, demanded some; increase exports, pleaded others. Subsidize the rice trade; tax the rice trade. Purchase more grain from abroad; purchase less grain from abroad.

Despite such an abundance of divergent tactics, the general understanding at the summit was that the old model of hunger management no longer worked; that the age of shipping surplus rice and wheat across the oceans was over; that handing out candy bars and sacks of flour was not a long-term solution; that direct food

assistance was dead; that now was the time for a new conceptualization of the old problem.

Everyone could agree that when the price of your daily bread topped your daily salary, all the agricultural methodology in the world would not make a difference. Money, on the other hand, could help. But how much money? And what, precisely, should we do with it?

In his opening address, the director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations made it simple. Dressed in flowing blue robes, Jacques Diouf assured the assembly that his organization could take care of the problem for \$30 billion a year. At which point Diouf requested donations.

Later that afternoon, the president of Senegal put the problem more bluntly. “This concept of assistance is now

MALTHUS WAS CORRECT TO PREDICT THAT AS TIME WENT ON, MORE PEOPLE WOULD STARVE TO DEATH. HE JUST GOT THE MECHANISM WRONG

out of date,” declared Abdoulaye Wade. “Don’t tell us what to do,” he continued. “We know what to do. You will see. We will change everything.” Which was how Wade requested \$800 million for his own country’s use, no questions asked.

“Modern agriculture requires capital and technology,” noted Uganda’s minister for water and the environment. “And for these inputs we need both local and foreign investors.”

Perhaps the latter-day emperors were right. Nothing improved the human condition like cash. Which meant that the only way to understand world hunger would be to follow the money.

Although food and coin made a nice pair, there was a certain irony to the betrothal, considering that years before the debut of shekels and bullion, there were plenty of bananas and coconuts. Indeed, many anthropologists who study pre-industrial societies have asserted that instead of slogging through a short, brutish life of pale-

olithic poverty, so-called savage hunter-gatherers ate better than we eat, worked less than we work, slept a lot more than we sleep, and spent a great deal of their time hanging out, doing nothing. “The amount of hunger,” Marshall Sahlins wrote three decades ago in his book *Stone Age Economics*, “increases relatively and absolutely with the evolution of culture.” Indigent or not, peckish primitives found ready supplies of mollusks, moths, and caterpillars. “Hunters,” concluded Sahlins, “keep banker’s hours.”

Perhaps there really was a golden age of plenty, a time and place removed from everything we know of the world, a time without money, a time without hunger: the ever fruiting plains of Avalon and Eden, the big rock-candy mountain, and Cockaigne, where fish and fowl begged to be eaten and the rivers flowed with wine. Explorers who have sought such lands of primal satiation have more often than not found themselves floating around the South Pacific. Here they discovered Tikopia, an island where the natives feast all visitors with *roi*, *upupu*, and *oka*, rich and fragrant dishes concocted from great piles of almonds, cassava, breadfruit, sago, taro, and yams—all pounded together and slow-cooked over hot rocks until the ingredients have coagulated into a thick, sweet pudding. There’s plenty for everybody.

Tikopia was living, breathing, ethnological proof of prelapsarian satiation. Then, half a century ago, the island hit a spot of bad luck. Back-to-back cyclones laid waste to huts, trees, and tubers. The almonds, cassava, sago, taro, and yams disappeared into the sea, along with every last betelnut and breadfruit. The big rock-candy mountain transformed into a wasteland, and the emaciated natives, once renowned for their generosity and kindness, turned kinsman against kinsman, tribesman against chief. “Nearly everyone was stealing,” reported the anthropologist James Spillius, “and nearly everyone was robbed.”

Indeed, even the most bucolic of the loin-clothed set don’t always like to share, particularly around dinnertime. “Broil your rat with its fur on,” goes the Maori proverb, “lest you be disturbed by someone.” And the Bemba have a

special name for the person who sits in your house and says: "I expect you are going to cook soon. What a fine lot of meat you have today!" That person is called a witch.

Of course, as Stone Age economies progress toward cash economies, warlocks and devils become poor people—which may be a step in the right direction. Perhaps the radical anthropologists of the 1960s had let politics slip into their fieldwork, and had been wrong to vilify modern markets. Perhaps the Congolese Pygmies, the Komu-Konda, and the Wugukani worked harder than we do, for much less. Not to mention the various and sundry other savages of Africa and Melanesia, whose

offered more drachmas. In 323 B.C. the penalty for breaking grain contracts during a hunger crisis was death, but Dionysodorus, like many an ancient merchant, almost certainly managed to evade his mug of hemlock.

The standard reaction of the Roman plebeian in times of food shortage was to rush the Palatine and threaten to burn the grain-rich senators alive. "It is most unjust that the hunger of one's own fellow-citizens should be a source of profiteering for anyone," lamented the Roman consul Antistius Rusticus—but nobody listened to him. When severe food shortages struck during the Middle Ages, merchants set up stalls in the open market and purveyed

The World Food Program had been recycling agricultural surpluses and sending them across the world since 1962. Now, Sheeran declared, the program was facing the biggest challenge in its history, and if her organization and the famine-relief industry in general did not take immediate action, the number of hungry people in the world would soon double. "The bottom billion will become the bottom two billion," said Sheeran. It was the 1970s all over again. By percentages, as bad as it got. By real numbers, beyond the beyond.

The press scribbled in their notebooks and tapped their laptops. And Josette Sheeran smiled. An ex-journalist, she had learned the subtleties



famished gullets drove them to sorcery, senilicide, and cannibalism.

But what about all those other golden ages, particularly the ones that featured money? When classical Athens descended into one of its periodic food shortages, long-forgotten celebrities like Xenokles and Arcestratos would bestow hundreds of thousands of *medimnoi* of grain upon the suffering city-state and make things right. Like their modern equivalents, the ancient celebrities were rewarded with prime-time bronze statues, names carved in marble, and front-row seats at the games.

Of course, there was plenty of grain hoarding and price gouging, too. A couple thousand years ago, a Greek shipping merchant named Dionysodorus was hauled into court for promising to deliver grain to Athens but instead selling it to Rhodes, where buyers had

chops and steaks of human meat. During Eastern Europe's great hunger of 1032, parents sold their children.

On the third morning of the Rome hunger summit I sat in the back row of the Iran Room, where the United Nations held its press conferences, and listened to the remarks of Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Program. The WFP is the largest humanitarian organization in the world, part of the elite club of NGOs that have spent billions trying to end world hunger. Sheeran had just completed her first year as executive director of the WFP, and already rumor had it she might be next in line for president of the United Nations. "High food prices and increasing demand present a huge, historic opportunity," said Sheeran.

of media relations at the *Washington Times*, the conservative daily broadsheet founded and bankrolled by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Sheeran joined the church in 1975 and could boast a classic '70s de-programming story wherein her father—the former mayor of West Orange, New Jersey—stormed a church-run school and tried to rescue his daughter. The attempt failed, and Sheeran remained a member of the church for more than two decades, even as her spiritual leader declared, "I will conquer and subjugate the world" and, "I am your brain." She reached a pinnacle of sorts as the managing editor of the *Times*. Then, having exhausted the social, political, and professional possibilities of Moon's church, Sheeran left the paper, converted to Episcopalianism, took a job as an under-

secretary of state for the George W. Bush Administration—and, finally, decided to feed the hungry.

Sheeran was now directing the World Food Program's \$6 billion budget. She commanded their vast fleets of barges, camels, donkeys, planes, trains, trucks, and elephants. When Sheeran finished her remarks I followed her out of the Iran Room and asked if she could explain what she had meant when she said, "High food prices and increasing demand present a huge, historic opportunity." Where was room for opportunity in high food prices and increasing demand? Were not high food

gram came in the form of food, but as the years went by a growing proportion of the contributions came in the form of cash. Originally, the organization had focused on delivering its rice and beans directly to those who had the bad luck to inhabit the most cursed spots on earth. But as grain surpluses went down and the price of shipping went up, the WFP took the logical step of purchasing food supplies from sources closer to the famine, in many cases even from within the borders of the affected country. Thus did the WFP purchase 18,000 metric tons of corn and beans

ther reaches of their client nations. Such purchases, as logistically difficult as they might be, would increase and support the agricultural efforts of these so-called smallholders. "This is the next wave of the story," said Sheeran.

Grain purchases from small farmers and traders would put cash into the hands of hundreds of thousands of people and encourage farmers to plant and harvest more and more food. In addition, the WFP would put these farmers in contact with other groups, who would in turn help them acquire better seeds,



prices driving riots and famine across the globe? Were not there more hungry people than ever before?

"There was a time when we did not know how to produce enough food in the world," Sheeran said, and gave me a dazzling smile. "Now we do." Of course, every hungercrat at the Rome conference understood there was enough food for everyone, even if the fact of food paled before the privilege of purchasing it.

As Sheeran began the narrative of how the World Food Program would eradicate world hunger, we were joined by her second in command, Nancy Roman, the WFP's director of communications, who observed Sheeran the way campaign managers monitor their candidate. "This is not your grandmother's food aid," Sheeran quipped as Roman kept watch.

In the beginning, most of the contributions to the World Food Pro-

gram came in the form of food, but as the years went by a growing proportion of the contributions came in the form of cash. Originally, the organization had focused on delivering its rice and beans directly to those who had the bad luck to inhabit the most cursed spots on earth. But as grain surpluses went down and the price of shipping went up, the WFP took the logical step of purchasing food supplies from sources closer to the famine, in many cases even from within the borders of the affected country. Thus did the WFP purchase 18,000 metric tons of corn and beans

from Rwanda last year, for \$6.3 million, and 210,000 metric tons of food from Uganda, for \$55 million. Which made these countries' respective presidents, Paul Kagame and Yoweri Museveni, happy to cooperate with the WFP's designs for the future.

In fact, World Food Program plans called for the presidents of Rwanda and Uganda to travel to New York just a few months after the Rome hunger summit. There, at United Nations world headquarters, presidents Kagame and Museveni would welcome the WFP's newest program. And on that morning, Josette Sheeran revealed, the African presidents would be joined by none other than Bill Gates.

Gates, Sheeran explained, was going to help the WFP expand its program of local purchasing to small farmers and grain traders in the far-

ther reaches of their client nations. Such purchases, as logistically difficult as they might be, would increase and support the agricultural efforts of these so-called smallholders. "This is the next wave of the story," said Sheeran.

Grain purchases from small farmers and traders would put cash into the hands of hundreds of thousands of people and encourage farmers to plant and harvest more and more food. In addition, the WFP would put these farmers in contact with other groups, who would in turn help them acquire better seeds,

fertilizers, and pesticides, more advanced irrigation systems, larger warehouse facilities, and improved access to roads. Thus could a poverty-stricken peasant move from being a recipient of food aid one year, to creating a bit of surplus the next, to making a profitable business out of it a few years down the line—and supplying food for others.

In order to realize these plans, the World Food Program would guarantee a market where none might now exist. They would do so, in part, by "forward contracting," whereby the WFP would promise to purchase a certain amount of a farmer's output, at a certain price, either one, two, or three years down the line. Such guarantees would give small farmers the incentive to plant more crops, since they could count on an eventual market for their goods. A WFP contract might even help farmers get

credit from the local bank, or perhaps a bit of crop insurance.

Josette Sheeran told me the acronym for her pilot program: P4P, which stands for Purchase for Progress. The \$76 million program would be funded by the Howard G. Buffet Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the government of Belgium. In its first year of forward contracting, P4P would commit the World Food Program to purchasing 40,000 tons of food from 350,000 small farmers. “We are studying a proposal with Bill Gates on a way to do the contract,” Sheeran said.

P4P was designed to mimic sophisticated global markets. Along with its purchase guarantees, P4P included plans to support countrywide commodity exchanges, which the WFP hoped would develop along the lines of the Chicago Board of Trade. (In Ethiopia and Uganda, exchanges have already opened.) In the new paradigm, the smallest farmer can benefit from the biggest market.

In some cases, P4P would not purchase a farmer’s grain immediately but instead would encourage him to warehouse his product and receive a receipt. More mysterious than rice or millet, this slip of paper presented a number of intriguing possibilities. First of all, the receipt allowed the farmer to register with his countrywide exchange, a place in the capital city where all the grain from all the country’s farmers could be bought and sold. Henceforth, the rural farmer could follow fluctuating prices with the technology of his mobile phone. The once indigent peasant could become a commodity trader and peg his sale to any time of the year. In this way, he could forecast, model, and leverage more financing. No matter that commodity speculation and grain hoarding had helped trigger the world food crisis. No matter that the recent Agribusiness Accountability Initiative declared that massive and unregulated commodity-market speculation “has pushed the prices of wheat, maize, rice and other basic foods out of the reach of hundreds of millions of people around the world.”

Of course, the WFP would take no responsibility for market peaks,

valleys, doldrums, and crashes. The happy news was that the solution to world hunger would no longer have to be about the food. It could be about the money. And I imagined the sowers and reapers of Africa, Asia, and South America transformed into a massive cartel of grain dealers—leveraging, diversifying, and cornering markets, driving the price of rice and beans as high as the market could bear. The peasant-turned-trader could wait as long as he liked to go to market and, while he waited, place bets on which way the market would move. He could hoard in the great tradition of grain dealers, hedge in the great tradition of bankers, and eventually pull in enough profit to render obsolete every guarantee and support of the World Food Program, quit farming, and go into insurance and banking for himself.

Thus the new paradigm. Thus the end of world hunger. And thus the end of my conversation with Josette Sheeran, who had to run to her next meeting. Nancy Roman stayed behind, so I asked her about rising food costs and all those riots. Higher wheat and rice prices could conceivably help farmers, higher grocery bills might benefit agribusiness, and speculation in commodity markets might be a boon for investors of all shapes and sizes—but how did such financial fluctuations affect the urban underclass of Nigeria and the rural poor of Guatemala?

“Listen,” said Nancy Roman, “speculation always drives up the cost of everything. Housing, telecommunications, shoes . . .”

Before she joined the WFP, Roman had been president of the G7 Group. She had made her living explaining Washington policy to hedge-fund managers, and as a result she could situate virtually any political or social phenomenon within easily comprehensible financial constructs, and she could explain why, in the midst of the world food crisis, the Ospraie Special Opportunity Fund and the BlackRock Agricultural Fund had gone on their latest buying sprees, snapping up grain silos, grain elevators, fertilizer-distribution centers,

and huge tracts of land. Indeed, as the world’s best and brightest focused on food security, the solution to the age-old problem of hunger appeared increasingly to coincide with the age-old techniques that the best and the brightest themselves employed to ensure their own security. The solution to world hunger was more investment all the way up and all the way down the line, and all investments were speculative.

“What people are uncomfortable about is when you speculate about food,” continued Roman, “something so fundamental to life. When you’re speculating on something that is the essence of life, when you’re speculating in that space—” and here she stopped. She gazed across the pressroom and she frowned.

“People don’t like that,” she said.

In good times and in bad, it’s hard to say no to money—which can foster dependency like nothing else. Of course, the purpose of transforming the international food-aid business into an international-business business is to foster entrepreneurial independence, not subservience. So in order to be truly transformative, the money gift cannot simply be a gift and nothing but a gift. If that money is not to create a perpetual state of subordination, the money gift must create business. As in P4P, the cash might impel small farmers to purchase more loans, more pesticides, more seeds, more land; to buy low and sell high.

Of course, when money has been deployed as a spur to action, the deployment becomes entangled in ideology. The money may eventually spark the widest variety of political and economic reactions. For example, Maori warriors believe that all gifts ultimately accrue to the giver, so that if you give a hungry man a fish he may rightfully gut and cook and eat the fish, but the spirit of the fish, its *hau*, will eventually become restless and return to the giver of the fish. And if the gift happens to be the guaranteed-grain-purchase formulae of the World Food Program, the *hau* will journey through the spirit land of giftdom until it returns to its

nativity, the warm, rich, capitalist womb of Bill Gates.

Along the same lines, Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that the Nambikwara chieftains of the Brazilian Amazon proved their chieftainship through generosity. By distributing food and other goods, the big man retained and increased his power. Thomas Hobbes made “gratitude” his fourth Law of Nature: “No man giveth, but with intention of good to himself.” And the Eskimo have a proverb: “Gifts make slaves as whips make dogs.”

In Niger, following a spate of local purchases like those promised through P4P, millet prices rose by 13 percent in local markets, followed by a 7 percent uptick in the national average. Guaranteed sales had increased consumer prices, which would eventually send more people into poverty and starvation. The money gift triggered all manner of unforeseen consequences.

It may be best not to know the ultimate effect of your gift. Such knowledge might compromise the ideological romance that made the gift possible in the first place. Thus did a frenzy of cash pledges mark the end of the hunger summit in Rome, although no one at the conference really understood what would be done with their money. Ed Schafer, the United States secretary of agriculture, led the flurry with an announcement that the United States Department of Agriculture would donate \$5 billion over the next two years. French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that his country would donate one billion euros. “Dying people are not happy people,” noted Sarkozy.

After Sarkozy, the International Fund for Agricultural Development announced a gift of \$200 million. The World Food Program mobilized \$750 million, and Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, pledged \$1.2 billion. The African Development bank pledged \$1 billion; Spain pledged \$773 million; the United Kingdom, \$590 million; Japan, \$150 million; Kuwait, \$100 million; Venezuela, \$100 million; the Netherlands, \$75 million; and New Zealand, \$7.5 million. On the last day of the hunger summit, the Islamic Development Bank chipped in \$1.5 billion.

“For what?” asked one hungercrat I met in the hallway. “It is unclear.”

As the New York P4P press conference approached, I began to consider a question for Bill Gates. Why, despite our spending more money than had ever been spent to solve the problem of world hunger, and why, despite everybody’s best efforts to reconceptualize the problem—why were more and more people going hungry? Perhaps Gates would consider the paradox that our efforts might be exacerbating the problem, that all we were doing was wrong. Obviously, this was not the kind of thing I could vet beforehand with a

WHY, DESPITE OUR SPENDING MORE MONEY THAN HAD EVER BEEN SPENT TO STOP WORLD HUNGER, WERE MORE AND MORE PEOPLE GOING HUNGRY?

publicist, or send over to media@gatesfoundation.org expecting a response. The nature of the question seemed to defy reason. Which was why I went to visit Amartya Sen.

As a nine-year-old boy, Sen witnessed the Bengal famine of 1943, the last Indian famine, which occurred only four years before the end of the Raj. Between 2 million and 3 million people died, and Sen watched them drop in the streets. This was the famine that occasioned Winston Churchill’s remark that the famine was of no great account because the Indians would simply “breed like rabbits.”

When Sen grew up he became a professor of economics and philosophy. His specialties included the economics of poverty and famine, and many of his 26 books and 375 articles deal with these subjects.

For much of his career, Sen focused on the fact that during the worst period of the Irish famine of the 1840s, “ship after ship sailed down the Shannon, bound for England, laden with wheat, oats, cattle, hogs, eggs, and butter.” Similarly, during the Ethiopian famine of 1973, food moved out of the hardest-hit Wollo province and headed toward more affluent purchasers in Addis Ababa. Such uncan-

ny food “counter-movements” led Sen to the insight that if governments were to intervene in such situations, famines would not be so very difficult to prevent. “The rulers,” he wrote, “never starve.”

Sen had crunched the hunger numbers as no one else had done before, not just for Bengal in 1943 and Ireland in the 1840s but also for Ukraine in the 1930s, China in the 1950s and 1960s, Ethiopia in the 1970s, Bangladesh in 1974, Somalia and Sudan several times over. In 1982 he published a book called *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* that transformed the field. Other books followed, including *Inequality Reexamined* and *Rationality and Freedom*. In 1998, Sen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics.

He lives in one of those quaint shingle-style houses a few blocks from Harvard Square, and on the rainy day I came to visit I found him dressed in an Oxford button-down, a gray sweater vest, a pair of khakis, and baby-blue socks. First we ate, then we talked. His daughter served baked fish in mustard seeds, and after lunch, since Sen was recovering from surgery, we retired to his living room and he reclined on the pink couch, a yellow coverlet tucked under his chin, his head and his knee propped up on an elaborate arrangement of seven pillows. Next to him sat a pitcher of ice water, a bottle of Evian, a box of Kleenex, a pair of crutches, two phones, and two assistants.

“When people think they believe in this or that,” said Sen, “I’m not sure.” He paused for an enormous period of time. He moved the pillows, straightened the coverlet, and glanced at the two watercolors that hung above the fireplace, portraits of Willard Quine and John Rawls. Old friends of his. And it occurred to me that Sen was not an economist so much as a philosopher, and that the solution he had found to world hunger had been the outcome of a purely rational analysis, the same approach Descartes employed to cast a cold eye on the nature of his own existence, and that Socrates used to face death without flinching.

“I believe in reason,” said Sen. “There are those who want to repress reason. Christian, Muslim, and Hin-

du fundamentalists, and those who pick a totem market economy, the liberal economic state. These are all anti-reason.”

He paused again and closed his eyes. I knew that Sen had written the introduction to a book on AIDS in India that had been funded by the Gates Foundation, and I wondered if the affiliation would cloud his perspective, but after a few minutes he began to expound upon the relationship of market-based movements of food to demand and purchasing power, and to explain that none of these forces necessarily have anything to do with who gets enough to eat and who doesn't. In fact, there was no fixed relation of any sort between food and famine. Some famines, like Bangladesh in 1974, occur in years of peak food availability.

In the midst of a severe hunger crisis, agricultural subsidies do not make much of a difference. And in the face of famine, a reliance on market economies is as ineffective as a reliance on loaves and fishes or manna from Heaven. Even so, said Sen, famines are not terribly difficult to avoid. Prevention requires the speedy implementation of emergency income-creation and employment programs, in combination with the broader social infrastructure of representative democracy and a free press, which happens to be the best early-warning system. Famine happens when rulers are alienated from those they rule, he explained, and a functioning democracy is a simple way to remove such alienation. Famine happens when there is no free press, because rulers tend to feel embarrassed when photographs of starving children appear on the front page.

New formulations of the hunger problem were not necessary. Sen had discovered the solution and he had gone over it many times, in abstruse tables for *Econometrica*, in articles for the *Handbook of Mathematical Economics*, and in features for *Granta*. He had explained the solution in his hundreds of essays and dozens of books in thousands of seminars and public addresses, yet his endlessly rehearsed points had not been enough. The world remained irrational, and people starved.

Of course, no other hunger narrative had ever succeeded either. Nor had

any institution in the world been able to end world hunger. “No one organization alone can do it,” Sen said. “None of the organizations alone can.”

I asked if the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization was up to the job.

“No,” he said, and closed his eyes. “That I profoundly doubt.”

What about Bill Gates and the World Food Program?



“It can do a lot of good,” he said. “But it’s not the way of solving the problem.”

“Nothing but money is sweeter than honey,” Benjamin Franklin famously remarked. The portliest founder understood that market dynamics reflect appetites, and were thus driven

more by the irrational gut than the rational mind. Unreason may not seem so unreasonable when you are dying of hunger, but full stomachs also make their demands and possess their involuntary ideologies.

Even the most well-intentioned, well-fed capitalist may fail to recognize that his own actions are causing the very problems he most sincerely wants to solve. After all, it is rational to invest in a commodity when its price rises, even if corn costs do happen to push up feed prices. Chickens eat chicken feed made from that corn, so the price of a dozen organic eggs hits \$6.39. “All indications are that soaring feed costs are going to force livestock and poultry producers to raise prices,” said Joel Brandenberger, president of the National Turkey Federation, “or risk going out of business.” Bill Roenigk, chief economist of the National Chicken Council, predicted that “food inflation is poised to begin and continue for many, many months.” All of which impelled Iowa Senator Charles Grassley to wax rabid and liken the American grocery lobby to the Nazi Party. “They have to have an excuse for increasing the price of their food,” said Grassley. “It’s another Adolf Hitler lie.”

As food prices rise, profit margins recede, and Sara Lee Corporation makes the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* with a \$695 million quarterly loss. Meanwhile, in El Salvador, the government suggests that hungry people simply tighten their belts.

Was anyone or anything immune from hunger’s plague of unreason? Were academics like Amartya Sen the only ones with the proper analytical tools to withstand the onslaught of hysteria? Was there any evidence, in all of human history, that those who lived the life of the mind might rise above their intestines?

From 1919 to 1922, as 5 million people across Russia died of famine, professors at the University of St. Petersburg—some of the most civilized and gifted people in the world—began to realize that they were all going to starve to death. During this crisis the intelligentsia kept a careful watch on themselves, as Professor Pitirim Sorokin reported in his monomaniacal world history, *Hunger as a*

Factor in Human Affairs, which he wrote while he was starving. Sorokin categorized world hunger into a strict taxonomy of absolute-deficiency starvation, relative-deficiency starvation, individual-comparative starvation, social-comparative starvation, and quantitative-qualitative relative-deficiency starvation. So the faculty at St. Petersburg knew precisely what to expect: feelings of hurt, weakness, headache, dizziness, and upset stomach, followed by nausea and terrible aches in the joints. Later, when unremitting hunger obscured the clarity of consciousness, they knew they would forget where they were, where they lived, and, finally, their names. A dull and hopeless apathy would set in, and then the infamous “famine psychosis” would reign: depression, paralysis, and an overwhelming sensation of existential emptiness. Pathological expressions of anger and rage would soon follow, along with hunger delirium and hallucinatory paroxysms like those experienced by Saint Anthony, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and Jesus in the wilderness, as Satan tempted him to twist stones into bread.

As the professors quietly awaited their fate, the rest of Russia went mad. In Moscow, a starving husband murdered his wife, carved a roast out of one part of her body, made a soup from another, and a jelly loaf from her feet. In Minsk, two children killed and gradually consumed a third. In the village of Esipovka, a woman cut up the body of her seven-year-old daughter and ate it. “Hunger makes a norm of abnormality,” wrote Pitirim Sorokin. “Starvation tends to alter our ideology.”

Every evening, the professors would seat themselves around the university refectory for their single daily meal of watery broth flecked with scraps of potato peel. As they ate, the biologists among the crowd would grimly prognosticate how long each could expect to survive. The behaviorists would report how many laboratory dogs had died that day, while the philosophers discussed the growing wave of hunger suicides. Entire families had ended their lives by carbon monoxide poisoning, others by infecting themselves with spotted typhus fever, others by hanging them-

selves or by drowning. “Mostly the conversation turned on who had been arrested, or had been executed, who had died,” Sorokin reported. “In one way or another all became thieves and swindlers.”

The United Nations had convened its Sixty-third General Assembly, which meant block after block of river-view high-rises cordoned off by riot police, gunships on the East River, frogmen in the water, helicopters in the sky, SWAT units in SWAT vans, waves of incensed demonstrators from China and the Upper West Side, and a rainbow coalition of dark-suited, grim-faced, crew-cut, heavyset men who spoke into their lapels. Past the police barricades the climate-change, bioenergy, and hunger crowd had magically reappeared—the same presidents, prime ministers, and assorted excellencies, in addition to a new entourage whose identity badges read, BILL GATES DELEGATION. Among the representatives of 192 member states, the presidents of Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda may have been happiest of all to see this new delegation, for it signified a gift.

I wound through the United Nations’ underground maze of baby-blue barricades, mini-militias, and metal detectors until I reached Conference Room 4, one of those vast interiors that promised the future of the world in its bold angles and curves and molded plastic chairs bolted to the floor. The burly guys with automatic weapons were not letting anyone in until the K-9 unit had given the all-clear, so I loitered beside a huddle of World Food Program underlings who snapped to attention when Nancy Roman marched into their midst, followed by their executive director, Josette Sheeran.

When the hounds headed out of Conference Room 4 the press headed in. We dispersed around the great modernist semicircle of egalitarian unidesk, and I settled less than ten feet from the big nameplates. The three African presidents were flanked beyond the empty chair for Bill Gates, their excellencies Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, and Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, all in their gray suits, all attended by bodyguards and aides.

Yoweri Museveni had been born a

peasant and Paul Kagame had spent his youth in refugee camps, but today they would sit with one of the world’s richest men. Jakaya Kikwete’s grandfather had been a chief, so perhaps he felt a bit more comfortable than the others in the presence of power. When President Kikwete came to America in 2006 he visited the headquarters of NASDAQ and appeared on CNBC to tout Tanzania as an international investment opportunity. But as business with Shell, Dominion Petroleum, and De Beers increased, Kikwete’s country veered into what the International Food Policy Research Institute was now calling an “alarming level of hunger.”

When Bill Gates and Josette Sheeran walked up to the dais, deep in conversation, the flashbulbs lit her red dress and his yellow paisley tie. Silence settled as Bettina Luescher, the former CNN International anchor and current World Food Program senior public-affairs officer, took her spot off to the side and soberly thanked everyone for coming. “This is a wonderful event,” she observed. Then she introduced her boss.

“Thank you,” said Josette Sheeran. She welcomed everyone to the kickoff of Purchase for Progress and then got right to the point. “Today you see a partnership determined to put hunger out of business.”

Sheeran recited her litany of ever-worsening facts and figures, including the latest hunger statistics, which indicated that the number of malnourished people had gone up once again and the cost of fertilizer in some areas had risen 400 percent. “Farmers are reeling,” said Sheeran.

ActionAid International, the global anti-poverty organization, had recently reported that a full quarter of the world’s population were now being denied their “right to food.” The droughts in Australia and Ukraine had destroyed harvests. In Nigeria, the price of *gari* had doubled. And authorities in Bihar, one of India’s poorest states, suggested that everyone switch from eating rice to eating rats. “Eating of rats will serve twin purposes,” Vijay Prakash, an official from the state’s welfare department, told Reuters. “It will save grains from being eaten away by rats and will simultaneously increase our grain stock.”

As Sheeran continued from where she had left off in Rome, Bill Gates began, as was his habit, to rock in his chair, his eyes fixed somewhere in the middle distance. He rocked and picked his ear and nodded and grinned, and eventually he turned on his microphone.

"It is an honor to be here with this group," he said. He looked down the table and nodded at the African presidents, who nodded back.

Then, in the great visionary tradition of the United Nations, Bill Gates spoke of a world in which the haves can teach the have-nots how to sell. "Ultimately, the goal here is to have these markets be self-sustaining," he said, noting that most of the world's poor people happened to be farmers. "Allowing them to participate in these markets is a real win-win."

Through such received wisdom and clichés did the chieftain display his generosity, and turn wolves into dogs.

"Let me join Josette in expressing my sincere appreciation to Bill Gates," said Jakaya Kikwete. "It is our problem," continued Kikwete. "You are coming to our rescue."

Paul Kagame was the next African president to speak, and the Tutsi general who had dominated Rwandan politics since the genocide was on his best behavior. "We are very happy in Rwanda to be associated with this program," he droned. "It is our duty as governments to make these cooperative efforts work." Indeed, out of a population of 9 million, almost 5 million Rwandans are at risk of going hungry.

After his short speech, Kagame yielded the floor to Uganda's president, the elder statesman of the little group. "High food prices are very good for us," said Yoweri Museveni, who had been criticized for arresting opposition leaders, clamping down on the press, and working to destroy some of the last remnants of Uganda's rain forest in order to reward politically connected plantation owners for whom high food prices were indeed a very good thing. In the northeast of Uganda more than 700,000 people did not have enough food. And in the provincial capital of Moroto, three-quarters of the population were starving to death. Here, escalating prices for maize, sorghum, and pulses would not be good news.

"Thank you, Josette," concluded Yoweri Museveni. "She buys a lot of food from us," he said. "And I salute Mr. Bill Gates."

Now Bettina Luescher returned to her microphone and asked if anyone had any questions. I raised my hand but she called on someone else. Second question, she looked right past me. Ditto for the third.

"We are running out of time," said Luescher. "One last question."

She gazed at the multitude of hands from front to back and all around the arc of the majestic semicircle. Then she smiled and said, "Fred."

I clicked on my microphone and said I had a question for Mr. Gates: Despite all he was doing to end world hunger, might not programs like Purchase for Progress in the end perpetuate market conditions that actually promote world hunger?

An uncomfortable silence settled on the room, and for the first time that morning Bill Gates stopped smiling. Instead of answering my question he asked one in return, the only indication of his annoyance the fact that he had forgotten to turn on his microphone. "What do you mean by 'market conditions'?" he asked.

I had planned my question in advance, but never suspected I would be required to speak at any length. Now I found myself in front of a microphone, in full possession of my own famine narrative, a story that had been accruing for months. An irresistible urge took hold, and I launched into the tale of Dionysodorus the Athenian grain merchant, Roman mobs rushing the Palatine, and medieval markets for human flesh and living children. I cited Xenokles and Arcestratos, the Bemba and the Bushmen and the Tikopians of the South Pacific. The history of the world was the history of hungry people, I explained. Money, politics, war—none had ever been enough to stop starvation. And so on and so forth. Josette Sheeran sat frozen behind the dais and Bill Gates scowled.

"You should track what the food output has been," he said, and this time he remembered to turn on his microphone. "The amount of food being produced in the world today is much greater than millennia ago." His face had grown florid as he gazed down

from his perch beside the African presidents. "Incredible progress has been made," he recited. "You get operating markets, they can feed the world very well. This money is being spent because it improves the human condition." And now his smile returned. "If you look at historical figures and do not see a positive trend, you might not choose to be involved," he said, "but I do see a positive trend."

Gates shook his head and turned off his microphone, and Bettina Luescher announced that the news conference had come to an end. At which point, Jakaya Kikwete switched on his microphone.

"To assume that what the assistance that Bill Gates and Howard Buffet are extending to African farmers is doing is perpetuating hunger," said Kikwete, "that is a big misconception." The idea that Bill Gates and the World Food Program might actually be increasing famine had interrogated the very essence of the gift heading Kikwete's way: his fertilizer market, his seed market, his loans, his commodity-options technology, his slice of progress pie. And so the president of Tanzania recommenced his well-rehearsed paean to the new era of hunger management.

"I am seeing a lot of sense in what they are doing," Kikwete continued, but no one was listening anymore, not even Bettina Luescher, who repeated that the news conference was over. The press continued their quest to extract something more from Bill Gates, who ignored the noise. And still Tanzania's chief executive would not stop. Jakaya Kikwete wanted his money and his markets, and he would keep reciting until he got them.

Eventually, the African president tired of his speech. The aides and secretaries cleared the room, along with the World Food Program crowd and the Bill Gates Delegation. And for a moment, Conference Room 4 stood empty. Then Indonesia's minister for foreign affairs took a seat at the dais, alongside the prime minister of Denmark, the president of Poland, and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. A new press person announced a new press conference.

Hunger was over. It was time to discuss climate change. ■