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On the Centenary of a Famine:

Food Sovereignty

Progress since the World Food Summit of 1996 will now be reviewed by Heads of State in 2002. Perhaps it is nothing more than a footnote of history but the same span of years a century earlier (1896-1902) encompassed one of the worst famines in history. At least 30 million lives were lost because the colonized countries were denied national food security in favour of international commodity trade. On the eve of a new global trade round within which agriculture will top the menu and in preparation for the Food Summit review next year, small farmers' and civil society organizations are calling for Food Sovereignty – the supremacy of food production and consumption over trade and economic policies. History shows that their demands are justified...

At the end of the 19th century – while Great Britain and the United States advanced the untried virtues of *laissez-faire* capitalism, industrial technologies, and the draconian triumph of colonialism – the newly-constituted 'Third World' suffered through the most awful series of calamities since the Black Death smothered the globe five centuries before. From Northeast Brazil to Southern Africa, Central India and Northern China, no fewer than 30 million people died in a world with barely one-sixth of today's population. In Morocco and in the Horn of Africa, one-third of the people perished. One million were lost in Brazil's Northeast. Ten million died in China. Nineteen million starved to death in India. Though the disaster remains unparalleled in modern history, the tragedy went virtually unnoticed in the salons of London and the saloons of Washington.¹

The calamities took place during an astonishing era of trade liberalization ("globalization") that began with the repeal of Britain's Corn Laws and ended with the onset of World War I. This was a time of massive economic growth, enormous progress in steamship and rail transport, labour migration, and the establishment of global commodity and capital markets.² The ascendancy of *laissez-faire* capitalism in 1846 also coincided with the Great Hunger in Ireland and its demise in 1914 heralded the beginning of the end of colonial empires.

According to the politicians of the era, the rural poor died of 'natural causes'. A blistering sequence of El Niño/La Niña events battered the tropics and reverberated even into the farmlands of Europe and North America. The closing quarter of the century witnessed two horrific global famines (connected by a string of smaller or regional events) between 1876-79 and from 1896 to 1902. Unlike earlier El Niño cycles, however, the peasants found their traditional coping mechanisms dismantled by remote imperial bureaucracies. The new steam and communications (telegraph and cable) technologies that had promised to bring relief were used instead to suck food stocks from the fields of the hungry to the larders of their rulers oceans away. Without their bidding or understanding, farmers became part of the Nineteenth century's global market economy.³

Exactly 100 years after the last great famine cycle - in a period framed by the first Food Summit of 1996 and the Summit's rescheduled review in 2002, the poor are confronted with a new era of globalization, corporate colonialism, the first shocks of Global Warming, and a set of new

technologies promising, once again, to feed the hungry. The comparisons are depressingly familiar...

19th Century Globalization: The shift in British economic policy that took place in 1846 (from protectionism to free trade) was matched by Europe and North America's swing to the Gold Standard in the 1870s. Although the UK had adopted the standard in 1821, the rest of the industrializing world only came on board after Germany's defeat of France a half-century later (in 1871). The enthronement of the Gold Standard among nations was at least the equivalent of today's Uruguay Round (WTO) trade agreement.

The establishment of a global monetary regime abruptly demonetized silver and devastated much of the South – especially China and India. The acceptance of the Gold Standard also signaled new opportunities for international investment and speculation. European bankers were often able to borrow from their colonies at 2% interest to reinvest back home at 3% or higher. The new economic order allowed the banks to “flush out the produce” of their foreign fiefdoms – driving Brazil's Northeast - from cotton to cattle - and India from exports of opium and jute to exports of rice and wheat.

The Gold Standard reduced exchange risks and encouraged foreign direct investment. Europe's increasingly non-interventionist economic policies in the final quarter of the century were a huge impetus to entrepreneurship. Even as the great famine of 1896-1902 gathered strength, the world's first multinational corporations, the likes of Coca-Cola, International Harvester, General Electric and the forerunner of IBM, spread their wings, for the first time, across countries and continents.⁴ By the time *laissez-faire* policies shut down in 1914, US investment abroad equaled 7% of that country's GNP – a level it did not match again until 1966.⁵

The regions politically and/or economically dominated by the European powers were used to subsidize the transition of agricultural lands at home to other purposes. During an unprecedented ‘Thirty Year's War’ on England's farmers, fully two-thirds of English crop land was withdrawn from cultivation between the famine of 1876 and 1906.⁶ Unconcerned for its own farmers and food security and willing to rely on imports from its colonies, Britain allowed its wheat harvest to be halved on the eve of the 1896-1902 tragedy.⁷ Accordingly, India's grain exports to the UK more than doubled.⁸ Debt repayments and the cost of the British India Office “consumed most of India's grain surpluses” in the years preceding the monsoon failures of 1896-97 and 1899-1900.⁹

19th Century Technology: Science was conscripted to the service of the industrial empires. With Darwin's theories of Natural Selection gaining popularity, politicians believed that the “natural” disasters befalling the tropics were unavoidable. (Darwin's co-discoverer, Wallace, disagreed passionately and insisted that famine was an avoidable political failure.)

The other prevailing scientific theory at play was that “rain follows the plough”. Leading scientists and agricultural experts of the period believed that breaking sod miraculously released vapors in the soil that encouraged rainfall. (Today's biotech companies espouse analogous theories.) This view was supported by the earlier years of cultivation on the Canadian Prairies and on the American Great Plains when the first harvests were bountiful. But, in 1889, the drought that struck the tropics reached up along the 100th meridian from Texas to Manitoba destroying crops and driving thousands of farmers to the brink of starvation.¹⁰

By then, however, the North's city folk had a solution: import. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 halved the distance between Bombay's port and Britain's pantry. Steamships – that made routine trans-Atlantic crossings by the 1860s – stormed into the Indian Ocean. A year after the

opening of the canal, refrigerated shipments of American meat crossed, for the first time, to Britain and, in 1876, as El Niño ravaged the crops of the Third World, the first fully refrigerated steamship delivered Argentine beef to French restaurants.

The gap between Bombay's dock and the Punjabi harvest was bridged by the steam locomotive. From fewer than 5,000 miles of track in 1870, India's railways leapt to over 16,000 miles by 1890 and to over 32,000 miles by 1910. Argentina's tracks, during the same period, ratcheted upward from 600 to 5,000 to 17,000 miles. Mexico marched in tandem and even China reluctantly admitted over 5,000 miles of rail in 1910 from only 80 miles two decades before. New transportation technologies caused freight costs to drop profoundly and encouraged Europe, especially, to import agricultural commodities.¹¹ Railways clearly exacerbated the food shortages in both Asia and South America during this period.¹² In the famine of 1876-79, railways that had been touted as a defense against famine were used to ship grain from drought areas to private godowns and thence abroad. Telegraphs were used to instantly adjust grain prices upward (regardless of local supplies) in every village.¹³

Railway construction in India caused ecological devastation by encouraging the planting of export cereals like wheat and rice in areas previously sown to hardier subsistence crops. The soils suffered. Trains also extracted lumber and large forested areas were denuded causing desertification. Export crops were planted on pasture and the livestock was driven into less accessible and more vulnerable terrain. Not only were the soils damaged but the supply of cow dung for cooking and heating dried up. The necessity of the dung grew exponentially with the falling of the forests. Florence Nightingale (contradicting Karl Marx's technological optimism) argued that the railways aggravated the death toll. Recalling the famines decades later, Gandhi sided with the nurse.¹⁴ The rural poor lay down to die alongside the tracks that were laid down to rescue them from hunger.

19th Century Cultural Erosion: The sequence of horrific climatic events that marked the quarter-century would – under any circumstances – have caused famine and devastation. In his book, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davies makes a convincing case that the deliberate destruction of traditional food security strategies turned the crisis into a calamity of gargantuan proportions. The late Victorians, especially in the period 1896-1902, eroded the culture of conservation and preparation that are the standard hallmarks of rural societies. El Niño/La Niña events were no strangers to the tropics. Farmers knew the cycles and the signals but their response was curtailed by their indentured service to the global commodity market; by ecologically-ignorant colonial administrators; and by extraction-oriented transportation systems.

Sometimes, the industrializing powers were intentionally predatory. Germany took advantage of the climate-created chaos in China to advance its influence in the devastated northern provinces. Portugal took advantage of famine in Angola to soldier inland. Under the cloud of national disaster, Britain invaded Ethiopia and the United States toppled the Philippine republic. British bankers and investors used successive waves of famine to cycle through northeast Brazil's booms and busts as though they were an opportunity for crop rotation.

The message of the *Late Victorian Holocausts* is that farmers and Third World countries lost control over their own food security along with their national economies. The Manchu Qing Dynasty in China had established a brilliant system of "ever normal" granaries and canals. During the El Niño/La Niña events of the 18th century, the Qing efficiently established local soup kitchens and arranged the mass shipment of cereals to drought (or flood) regions. Food stocks were distributed either cheaply or without cost. "Food for work" and other means-tests were never used. During periods of food shortage, the central government asserted strict control over

prices and forcefully prevented speculation. As a rule, one-fifth of the national budget was directed to the maintenance of canals and grain stores. The UK-enforced opium trade; the Gold Standard; and the trade treaties dictated by industrializing powers led to the collapse of China's social security and brought on civil insurrections that furthered the catastrophe. In the 18th century Chinese farmers were significantly better off than their European counterparts and, while Europe's peasants starved through cycles of famines, historians now agree that perhaps only 2% of the people of China were habitually malnourished. The "globalization" of the 19th century dealt a harsh blow to local food security and self-reliance.

Food Histrionics

"We have the means; we have the capacity to wipe hunger and poverty from the face of the earth in our lifetime. We need only the will."

- John F. Kennedy, President of the United States, World Food Congress, Washington, D.C., USA, October, 1963.

"We have the means; we have the capacity to wipe hunger and poverty from the face of the earth in our lifetime. We need only the will."

- U Thant, Secretary- General of the United Nations, followed by Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, Lester Pearson of Canada (*et. al.* and *ad nauseum*), 2nd World Food Congress, The Hague, Netherlands, June, 1970.

"...today we must proclaim a bold objective – that within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day's bread, that no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition ... Let the nations gathered here resolve to confront the challenge."

- Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State, UN World Food Conference, Rome, Italy, November, 1974.

"What cosmetic cures are we going to apply so that within 20 years there are 400 million instead of 800 million hungry? This goal, for its modesty, is a shame."

- Fidel Castro, President of Cuba, World Food Summit, Rome, Italy, November, 1996.

On the Centenary of the 1896-1902 Famine:

On the eve of the World Food Summit review, the ecological and economic scene of the last great Victorian famine has obvious parallels. El Niño, of course, continues as a fickle world phenomena but international attention is now rightly focused on Global Warming brought on by the last two centuries of the North's industrial revolution. Climate change will create far more problems for the South – especially farmers – than for the North. Climate change is taking place as both the world's biological diversity and the indigenous knowledge systems needed to conserve and use biodiversity are under attack at the hands of the WTO and of polluting technologies and their corporate owners. At a more dangerous level than even in 1896-1902, national and community coping mechanisms are being eroded.

With equal force, the *laissez-faire* policies that were arrested at the outbreak of World War I have returned with so-called neo-liberal "globalization". Although it was neither named nor fully recognized until the Thatcher-Reagan era of the 1980s, the roots of globalization spring from the end of World War II and the creation of the Breton Woods institutions. Following the starvation faced by civilian populations during two world wars, there was also a drive to end hunger and achieve

world food security. It began in 1943 as Franklin Roosevelt called for a world free from hunger at a world food congress in Virginia. It went on to Quebec City in 1945 when Lester Pearson inaugurated the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and proposed a war against hunger. In 1946, one hundred years after the repeal of the British Corn Laws, Sir John Strachey, Britain's Minister of Agriculture and a descendent of the British brothers who covered up the worst famines in India's history, told the first FAO conference that a new partnership between farmers and scientists would feed the world. From thence, a succession of food congresses, conferences and summits have heard the hollow promises of the North's leaders promise the South an end to hunger.

At the World Food Summit next year, the North will again attempt to persuade the South that food security need not mean self-sufficiency – that poor nations should allow their farmers to be further integrated into global markets on the assumption that they will have the cash needed from their exports to import sufficient food stuffs to counter local production shortfalls. At the Summit and in the WTO, the North's leaders will tell the South that a new global trade round will benefit the poor and that new biotechnologies will bring an end to hunger. *This is not true. But only the rich have the luxury of repeating their mistakes: the poor die.* The only moral choice is to establish the supremacy of food security above WTO and other trade rules. The rallying words for farmers, the hungry, and their governments must be Food Sovereignty.

Endnotes

¹ The dates and figures are taken from Davis, Mike, *Late Victorian Holocausts – El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, Verso (London, New York), 2001, pp. 6-7. However, we have also used Fagan, Brian, *Floods, Famines, and Emperors – El Niño and the Fate of Civilizations*, Basic Books (New York, 1999), p. 8. Davis cites a range of sources for estimating a total of 30-50 million deaths during the period and shows that the estimates for deaths for two periods (1876-79 and 1896-1902 for Brazil, India and China range from 31.7 million to 61.3 million (Table P1, p.7). Fagan reports that there were at least 15 million deaths in India alone during the last 40 years of Queen Victoria's reign (p.8).

² O'Rourke, Kevin H. and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History – The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, MIT Press (Cambridge), 1999, p.77. This fascinating book advocates strongly in favour of globalization and highlights new technological developments.

³ Davis, Mike, *Late Victorian Holocausts – El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, pp. 6-7.

⁴ O'Rourke, Kevin H. and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History – The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, p. 217.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-222.

⁶ Davis, M., *Late Victorian Holocausts*, pp.119-120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.142 and endnote 7 on p.418.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Table 1.1, p. 27.

⁹ Fagan, Brian, *Floods, Famines, and Emperors*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Davis, M., *Late Victorian Holocausts*, pp. 120-121.

¹¹ O'Rourke, K. and Williamson, J., *Globalization and History*, pp. 33-35 and Table 3.2.

¹² Davis, M., *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 8. Davis also notes that David Landes, in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, states that railways in India helped prevent famine deaths. Fagan, *Floods, Famines, and Emperors*, p. 11, says that improved railways reduced deaths in India in the 1890s.

¹³ Davis, M., *Late Victorian Holocausts*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 319 and 332.