

Jessica Dijkman en Bas van Leeuwen (eds.), *An Economic History of Famine Resilience* (Routledge; London, 2020) 290p., € 36,99 ISBN 9780367776831

Dealing with hunger

An Economic History of Famine Resilience is a multi-author volume edited by Dr. Jessica Dijkman (Utrecht University) and Dr. Bas van Leeuwen (International Institute of Social History), two specialists in Economic History, who have conducted extensive research and have previously published on the subject. Throughout its thirteen chapters, the book traces different food crises and famines that have occurred in different parts of the world over the last two millennia. Specifically, it analyses how the market, the state (for example, through welfare or interventionist policies and price controls), and civil society (such as wealthy benefactors) responded. The volume reveals how each of these agents had greater or lesser weight and effectiveness in the different cases analysed.

The book explores the various social strategies put into place over the centuries and in different parts of the world, both to prevent famines or alleviate their effects. As some of the chapters – such as Dijkman’s on northwestern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – suggest, it is very likely that the consequences of famines in history would have been even more terrible had it not been for these (often combined) efforts. The book also highlights the ideological and religious components of some of the state strategies, as was the case in the Inca Empire, colonial India and twentieth-century China and Russia. The volume emphasizes the fact that the causes of famine are multiple and complex, that these events are rarely due to exclusively natural factors, but more often than not involve human factors. The book also underlines the socially unequal impact of famine throughout history. Not all social

groups were equally affected by famines, as becomes clear in the chapters on the early Roman Empire or the 1840s potato famine in Belgium. In addition, the book gives us numerous clues about the sources, both quantitative and qualitative, available for the study of famines, such as statistics, epigraphic, cadastral, and archival sources, and the chronicles of contemporary observers. These sources are critically analysed, highlighting their limitations, such as the urban bias inherent in the Roman sources generated by the elites, as illustrated in Chapter 3.

The volume joins a small group of recent works, including Curran, Luciuk and Newby (eds.), *Famines in European Economic History. The Last Great European Famines Reconsidered* (Routledge; New York, 2015) and Tonsmeyer et al., *Fighting Hunger, Dealing With Shortage. Everyday Life Under Occupation in World War II Europe. A Source Edition* (Brill; Leiden, 2021), that have paid attention to famines on the European continent. *An Economic History of Famine Resilience* adopts an ambitious spatial and chronological framework, dealing with famines that have taken place on different continents throughout history, from Antiquity to the 21st century. In this respect, the book is original and fills a long-standing historiographical gap, as few works have previously explored this topic in such a broad spectrum. This is precisely one of the most salient features of the book: addressing the phenomenon of famine in a transnational, comparative and long-term perspective.

The volume covers both the centre and the periphery, drawing comparisons between the two, as do the chapters focusing on

Ottoman Anatolia and the Inca Empire, where imperial strategies that benefited the capital region and its hinterland were carried out at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable areas of the empire. The book looks at both urban and rural areas, taking the opportunity to highlight the similarities and differences between the two spheres. Important efforts are also made to explain regional differences in the impact of famines, as in the chapter on the Belgian famine. The book also discusses the management of famines in both metropolises and colonies, and in both centralised and decentralised states. Furthermore, it explores cases that occurred under both democracies and authoritarian regimes, suggesting that in each case there were differentiated responses.

The volume, which incorporates more than a dozen case studies, is divided into three parts. The first and most extensive part focuses on the pre-modern world, when famines were more extreme than in later periods and coordinated efforts by states, markets and civil societies were less prevalent. The second part pays attention to the modern world. It is argued that the more robust and inclusive coping and communal redistributing mechanisms were, the greater the capacity to cope with food crises. It also debunks myths, such as the notion that China and Russia, two of the states most affected by major famines in the 19th and 20th centuries, were unable to prevent these crises in their territories. It also questions whether the most recent famines could have

been avoided. It is suggested that – although the trigger for these food crises had been a natural disaster – they escalated to the level of ‘famine’ because of the failure of the state and social mechanisms to prevent this.

The third part deals with long-term perspectives, addressing, among other themes, the relationship between famine and migration. In contrast to simplistic ‘*push and pull*’ approaches that establish a direct causal relationship between hunger and migration, it stresses the need to revalue the agency capacity of individuals, and advocates conceiving the relationship between famine and migration as a ‘continuum’ in which intermediate cases predominated.

In short, the volume offers a complex and nuanced picture of famines from Antiquity to the present day. However, while acknowledging the enormous effort required for such coordinated works with transnational and comparative perspectives, there is perhaps a lack of justification for the choice of case studies presented. The same could be said of the chosen ‘*top-down*’ approach, which would have been enriched by a ‘*bottom-up*’ perspective that included, for instance, informal relief and popular responses to famines. The volume would also have been enriched by final conclusions summarising the main ideas defended in this collective work. All in all, the book is a novel and necessary contribution, essential for scholars of the economic and social history of famines.

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