

Hunger and Poverty

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- **Marasmus:** wasting away due to insufficient consumption or absorption of food overall
 - lack of calories and protein
 - primarily in infants and children
 - typically due to poverty (lack of food)
 - or to gastrointestinal or other infections (also among poor)
 - symptoms:
 - muscle wasting and weakness - extreme thinness
 - sometimes with distended belly
 - growth retardation
 - voracious hunger
 - fretfulness, but continued alertness

- **Kwashiorkor:** wasting away due to lack of protein
 - calories may be sufficient, but protein is not
 - typically in infants that are weaned early
 - within a year of birth, often to make way for another infant
 - then fed a low-protein diet, like corn or rice gruel without milk, meat, beans, or other protein sources
 - symptoms: may seem less obviously sick than marasmus
 - muscle wasting and weakness
 - sometimes with distended belly
 - growth retardation
 - edema (swelling, especially of legs and feet, masking thinness)
 - depigmentation of skin and hair
 - diarrhea
 - anemia
 - loss of appetite
 - apathy, lethargy
 - eventually, blindness

- **PEM (Protein-energy malnutrition):** general term for starvation in adults
 - muscle wasting and weakness
 - anemia
 - shrinkage of organs and loss of their functions
 - edema (swelling)
 - diarrhea
 - sensitivity to cold
 - difficulty digesting food
 - irritability and difficulty concentrating
 - immune deficiency

- Plus more specific problems due to lack of particular vitamins or minerals
 - All these conditions blend together and overlap
- Hunger is a big problem
 - up to 1/6 of the world's population lacks sufficient food
 - estimated 31 million in US are “food insecure”
 - out of 304 million in 2008: about 10% of the US!
 - more than enough food exists to feed the world now
 - but not with the mix of foods that we eat here
 - especially, not with as much meat as we eat
 - famines get press, but most hunger is endemic (on-going)
 - even in famines, there is often enough food
 - the problem: people are too poor to buy enough food, and no longer have land to produce their own
- Origins of hunger
 - Foragers tend to be healthy and easily get enough food, even in harsh environments
 - studies of the !Kung “bushmen” of the Kalahari desert
 - work 2.5 hours/day to get food
 - 6 hours/day total, with getting water, firewood, making tools...
 - compare to us: 8+ hours/day, not counting getting food, commuting, etc.
 - and the !Kung live in a very harsh environment
 - studies of archaeological burials such as in the US midwest, when farming was adopted
 - health and life expectancy plummeted
 - So why adopt farming?
 - usually thought to be because farming produces more food per acre, supporting denser populations
 - Farmers using traditional methods have to work much harder to get their food
 - clearing, hoeing or plowing, planting, weeding, irrigating...
 - and tend to be much less healthy
 - due to less varied diet than foragers and other problems
 - but they produce more food per acre
 - With the development of cities
 - where many people do not produce their own food
 - food became a commodity, produced for sale
 - much earlier than the 16th century, as Robbins says
 - clearly true in Mesopotamia by 2500 BC or earlier
 - shiploads of grain were routinely traded to Rome and a few other cities by the last few centuries BC
 - but Robbins is right that this change reached many parts of the world only in the last few centuries
 - With the spread of capitalism, as we saw,
 - many farmers became landless laborers
 - depending on wage labor to buy food

- Quibble with Robbins: since the 1960's, minimum wage does cover farm labor, even if it is piecework
- With the development of capitalist production of food as a commodity
 - there was greater pressure to reduce its cost
 - done by largely replacing human energy input (labor) with energy input from machines, fertilizers, etc.
- requires capital, more available to large landholders
 - small farmers cannot cut costs as much
 - they can't compete with the lower prices
 - so large-scale agriculture replaces small family farms
- Food production has gotten less and less efficient
 - swidden farmer: 1 kcal input for 11 kcal output in corn
 - farmer with an ox and steel plow: 1 kcal input for only 4.3 kcal output
 - this is a misleading comparison, because it is only for one year
 - using swidden methods, the farmer has to move to a new plot every few years, returning only after decades
 - using a plow, same plot is used almost constantly
 - swidden farming only works if there are few people and lots of land -- it is simply not an option otherwise
 - now (1980) 1 kcal in for 3.5 kcal out
 - or 2.8 kcal?
 - or 8 kcal in for 1 kcal out, with processing, packing, delivery?
 - point: farming now requires lots of capital to buy energy
- Green Revolution
 - development of hybrid “High Yielding Varieties” (HYVs) of corn, wheat, rice, etc.
 - that grow very well with lots of water and fertilizer
 - problems:
 - poor farmers could not afford the water and fertilizer
 - prices of both depend on oil prices, fluctuate, rise
 - monocropping HYVs encourages insect and other pests
 - vast amounts of one kind of food, year after year
 - vs. little patches of different foods in different places every year
 - supports huge, ongoing pest infestations
 - requiring lots of expensive pesticides to control
 - fertilizers and water promote weeds, requiring herbicides
 - Accelerated shift to large, capital-intensive farming
- Capital-intensive agriculture
 - makes food cheap
 - a good thing
 - pushes most people out of farming, making them dependent on wage labor to buy food
 - a dangerous thing
 - creates a large pool of laborers, keeping labor cheap
 - good for capitalists, bad for laborers

- makes food production dependent on energy (oil) inputs
 - a risky thing in the long run
 - leads states to fight for access to oil
 - may make food very expensive if oil gets expensive
 - a group of New Zealand dairy farmers are revolutionizing dairying in Minnesota by letting cows eat grass -- feed has gotten too expensive!
 - that is, energy prices have gotten so high that reverting to a less energy-intensive method is cheaper
 - this is just a taste of what is to come...
- Medicalization of hunger
 - allows governments and public to see “malnutrition” or “nervos” as
 - a biological issue
 - subject to technical-medical fixes
 - a problem of individual sick people
 - ignoring the basic cause:
 - food is distributed by capitalist markets
 - in exchange for money
 - but many people cannot earn enough money to buy it
 - To discuss hunger is to critique the state for a failure
 - but to discuss diseases due to malnutrition is to discuss biology, not the fault of anyone
- Can economic development projects help?
 - Maybe it has in some places
 - but citing Brazil as a success is not very convincing
 - In many regions, hunger has not been reduced
 - Latin America
 - South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh)
 - Sub-Saharan Africa
 - Yet in those regions, development has imposed costs
 - IMF and World Bank have required cutbacks to government programs for food, health, education, etc.
 - Many dam projects have displaced people from the best river valley land, etc.
- Development projects have been plagued by
 - “economic reductionism”: reducing social reality to obvious economic elements
 - overlooking the non-economic practices and institutions that really make things work
 - analogy of “scientific” management of forests by removing all the “worthless” plants and animals, leading to collapse
 - overconfidence in science, technology, and “rational” western approaches
 - use of state force to coerce people to cooperate
 - in short:
 - development planners think they are very smart
 - and that the poor they are trying to help are stupid and irrational
 - yet many, if not most, development projects fail

- Is there a solution?
 - development projects now try to incorporate anthropologists
 - whose job it is to
 - collect social background to guide the initial planning
 - to get guidance from the people to be helped from the beginning
 - to get feedback while the project is being started and run
 - to advocate for the people to the development agency
 - some projects are doing better now
 - but the superior outsider attitude persists
- Yet many of the poor survive... how?
 - by resorting to the informal economy
 - economic activity that is hidden from the state
 - largely illegal ways of making money
 - largely opportunities created by the state banning or regulating something
 - creating an opportunity to profit by violating the law
 - working for illegally low pay “under the table”
 - selling illegal drugs
 - selling smuggled goods cheaply without duties or taxes
 - stealing, or selling stolen goods
 - running illegal betting or gambling operations
 - prostitution, etc.
 - the informal economy is huge
 - estimated 9.4% of US economy
 - estimated 40% of Brazilian economy
 - the informal economy is often dangerous, low-paying, and risks arrest and imprisonment
 - so people try to switch to legitimate jobs when they can
 - but if you can't get a real job, what can you do?
- the informal economy is partially a global issue, because poverty results from global processes of
 - alienation from land
 - government policies in peripheral countries that maintain a good investment climate by ensuring low wages
 - migration into countries thought to have better opportunities
 - outsourcing of jobs from those countries to places where labor is cheap
 - reducing government support for the poor
 - due to IMF or World Bank pressure in the periphery
 - or due to neoclassical economic ideology in the core
- blaming the drug trade (or other aspects of the informal economy) on the immorality of the poor
 - is like medicalizing hunger
 - it focuses blame on bad individuals or ethnic groups
 - and diverts it from the larger processes that put lots of people in a position where they have few alternatives

- as with hunger, discussing poverty is criticizing the state for a failure
 - but discussing crime shifts the blame away from the state and the system that benefits the wealthy
 - it allows those who benefit from the current system to feel like virtuous victims, rather than beneficiaries of an unfair system