

HOW THE OTHER HALF DIES

KELVIN ROWLEY

Susan George has calculated that in the time the average reader takes to get through her book, somewhere in the world 2500 people will have died of starvation or hunger-related illness. But actual death by starvation is merely the tip of the iceberg. Although the problem of world hunger is usually presented in the media in terms of mass mortality in periods of famine, people who actually drop dead for lack of food are relatively rare.

The greatest problem is not the occasional famine, notwithstanding the immense suffering it causes. The real problem of world hunger is one of chronic malnutrition — a condition affecting perhaps half of the world's population. This is not as simple and spectacular, but it takes a crueler toll in the long run. Serious protein and vitamin deficiencies — and it is this rather than lack of calories that does the most damage — warps and stunts a person's physical development, often to the point where they are physically incapable of productive labour in any form. Few organs are left unaffected by chronic malnutrition. Brain damage caused by starvation can reduce people to clinical cretinism. Resistance to all sorts of infectious diseases and parasites is greatly reduced, causing innumerable deaths that nominally have no link to hunger. If overall few people die outright from starvation, chronic hunger is thus everywhere associated with a vast squandering of human potential through both physical and mental debilitation of the living, and devastatingly high death rates. And it should not be necessary to add that those of us who are comfortable and well fed cannot even begin to comprehend the agony of being permanently hungry, when each meal is just a chance to go on being hungry a bit longer.

It is easy enough to explain the occurrence of a particular famine — usually a failure of the seasons or an epidemic of a particular crop disease is all that is needed to upset the precarious balance between life and death for large numbers of people. But such an explanation evades the fundamental question of why it is that so many people spend their lives so close to the abyss. We have to ask what the causes are, not so much of individual famines, but of the condition of chronic hunger, in which even slight variations in climatic and ecological conditions spell disaster.

This is the question that Susan George attempts to answer in this invaluable book. It is comprehensive and fully documented, but designed to be 'something people will feel they can read on the bus, not something that has to be sat grimly in front of in a library'. It is a devastating attack on the widespread myth that world hunger is due to 'too many people, not enough resources', and on the ill-conceived policies this myth supports.

'Too many people, not enough resources' has been an ever-popular slogan since 1798, when the Rev. T.R. Malthus first developed his theorem that population tends to increase in a geometric ratio, the food supply in an arithmetic ratio, and that therefore something has to give somewhere. This was not simply, or even

primarily, an attempt to explain the mechanisms of population growth. It was an attempt to explain mass poverty in eighteenth century Europe. Of his theory, Malthus wrote in the preface to the second edition (1804) of his Essay on the Principle of Population: 'It appeared to account for much of that poverty and misery observable among the lower classes of people in every nation and for those reiterated failures in the efforts of the higher classes to relieve them. The more I considered the subject from this point of view, the more importance it acquired...' Poverty, says Malthus, is not a product of social institutions, but of the always-unequal contest between mankind's reason and its vices. Don't bother considering the relationship between the rich and the poor, says Malthus. Focus all your attention on 'the passion between the sexes'. Don't blame the rich for exploiting the poor. Blame the poor for reproducing.

Yet the explanation of poverty and hunger in terms of too many people and not enough resources will not hold up. The present population of our planet is about four billion. There is little we can do to prevent it doubling by early in the twenty-first century (short of precipitating a nuclear holocaust). But before pressing the panic buttons on spaceship earth, take a look at the special issue of Scientific American on 'The Human Population' (September 1974). In an article on 'Food and Population', Professor Roger Revelle calculates that on the basis of present technology, the earth's resources could support a human population of forty to fifty billion. As Mrs. George says: 'Today's world has all the physical resources and technical skills necessary to feed the present population of the planet or a much larger one...the problem is not a technical one...'

It may be objected that even though the world as a whole is not overpopulated, certain countries are. If this were the case, poverty could be eliminated very simply by redistributing the world's population through migration, but this is not advocated by our neo-Malthusians: they prefer the poor to stay in their own backyard and offer them advice on birth control instead of plane tickets. But unfortunately for even this watered down version of the argument, there is simply no correlation between population density and hunger. Starvation is to be found in India, with a population density of 122 inhabitants per square kilometre, but it is also found in Bolivia with 5 inhabitants per square kilometre and does not exist in Holland, with 326.

The real problem is thus not one of a shortage of resources or an excess of population, but one of the control and utilization of these resources. Hunger is a social and economic problem — not a race between our technological ingenuity and our animal passions. Yet the Malthusian myth persists, in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Why? Now, as in Malthus' time, the rich and powerful find it more convenient to explain poverty by claiming that the poor have too many children than to turn the spotlight on the unsavoury aspects of the social order from which they derive their wealth, power, and status.

The simple fact is that, given the material circumstances under which they live, the poor do not have too many children. In countries such as India, children are a valuable economic resource for their parents. Casual child labour is an important component of family income when the parents are young, and in their old age parents are completely dependent on their offspring. To be unable to produce children is a disaster in a society where, as the peasant saying goes, 'my children are my only wealth'. It is hardly surprising that India's birth control program was strongly resisted by the very people it was said to benefit, and degenerated into the forcible sterilization of hapless victims rounded up on the streets.

I will admit, however, that present rates of population growth cannot go on indefinitely without disastrous consequences — no more than any process of compound growth. But we are not concerned with hypothetical disasters occurring in one or two hundred years, but with the very real, present-day disaster embracing

half the population of this planet. Population policies will not eliminate hunger. But altering the material circumstances of life which compel poor people to have large families, reducing (and hopefully eliminating) poverty through economic development, will solve the so-called 'population problem'.

This brings us to the so-called Green Revolution — the type of agricultural economic development promoted by American government and business interests in the 1960's. For those who imagined that it would greatly reduce hunger by dramatically increasing food production and 'overcoming shortages', it has proved a bitter disappointment.

The Green Revolution began in the 1940's with research sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation which led to the development of new high-yield breeds of wheat and rice. These would enable farmers to multiply the output from a given area of land several times over. In the 1960's, these innovations were enthusiastically applied in many underdeveloped countries.

The catch was that the new varieties of grain, developed by laboratory breeding rather than hundreds of years of natural selection, were very sensitive. They required good irrigation and lots of fertilizer. They also needed the protection of regular doses of weed killers, fungicides and pesticides. All this cost quite a bit of money, so that the Green Revolution could only be introduced by big commercial farmers. Not only did the small farmers in areas where it was introduced miss out on the benefits of the Green Revolution, they were very often its most immediate victims. Landlords saw in it a chance of greater profit, and cleared small tenant farmers from land to make way for the new-fangled capital-intensive agriculture. Food production, unemployment, and hunger all increased side by side. Sir Thomas More remarked of the enclosure movement of sixteenth century England that 'sheep were eating men'. In an exact twentieth century parallel the Green Revolution led to 'grain eating men'.

All this should have been obvious to anyone who gave five minutes thought to questions of socio-economic structure, but it was ignored by all the American high-powered 'experts' who inflicted this phony revolution on desperately poor countries. Obsessed with the Malthusian drama of a race between population and resources, they made the big mistake of assuming that only inadequate technology could prevent hungry people from producing the food they need. The nature of the socio-economic institutions under which the hungry live and die, and through which technology is put to use, was simply ignored. Mrs. George comments: 'One is almost ashamed to write such an apparent cliché as The Definition of Social Goals Must Precede the Choice of Technology, but it must be worth saying since so few countries seem to have observed it'.

Rejecting the false Malthusian dilemma, Susan George sees the central problem as one of the distribution of income and control of resources. People go hungry because they are institutionally denied access to the resources they could, theoretically, use to produce food for themselves. Ownership of the most important resource in economically underdeveloped countries, land, is highly concentrated. In Latin America, 17% of landowners control 90% of the land; in Asia, 20% of landowners control 60% of the land; and in Africa, 25% of owners control 96% of the land. A third or more of the rural population is landless. The poor can only produce food, under these circumstances, when there is a fat profit in it for the rich.

There is also the dizzying inequality between rich and poor nations in the world capitalist economy as a whole. The one quarter of the world's population in the advanced capitalist countries consume three quarters of its wealth. In this sort of context, the markets provided by poor countries, let alone the poorest people in these countries, are insignificant. There is much more money to be made producing luxury goods for the affluent than in attempting to sell even the most essential goods to penniless and destitute people who have no way of paying for them.

Economics textbooks tell students that the operation of the free market leads to the most rational and efficient allocation of resources. Indeed it does — but only in relation to a given institutional structure and distribution of purchasing power. If that institutional structure is wasteful and destructive, all the market rationality in the world will not alter this. What it will mean is that people are highly efficient in the ways they go about wasting and destroying resources. When academic economists talk complacently of the 'democracy of the market-place' it is essential to remember that the votes are always stacked against the impoverished majority, against those whose needs are most pressing.

How the Other Half Dies contains some striking examples of this. Replying to Malthus in 1807, William Hazlitt made the observation that the dogs and horses of the rich 'eat up the food of the children of the poor'. Little has changed today. The 35 million pet dogs and 30 million cats of the United States are a better business proposition than two billion hungry people. In poor countries farmers are evicted from prime land and left to starve, so that the land can be used to grow carnations for export. The logic of profit and power may be implacable, but after considering examples such as these (and Mrs. George provides many more) it is hard to see how anyone can claim that it is a matter of satisfying human needs in the most efficient manner.

The economies of the advanced capitalist countries are geared primarily to their own markets, not those of the Third World countries. Yet they do have significant interest in the Third World — as a source of cheap raw materials, as a location for low-cost (i.e. low-wage) production, as an outlet for investment and even to some extent as a market for goods. These objectives are by no means consistent with one another, and there are many local variations. But they all add up to keeping the poor countries firmly within the framework of the capitalist world market. It is this, rather than unreasoning hysteria about Castroist guerrillas in the Andes or Soviet influence among the newly independent nations of Africa, that explains American determination to stamp out 'communism' and 'subversion'. They are top of the pile, and will seek to isolate and destroy anyone who tried to upset the hierarchy.

The operations of foreign aid programs and international agencies such as the World Bank are all geared to enforcing acceptance of these 'world market forces'. In a series of chapters, Mrs. George shows this is the basic explanation for the dismal failure of their various attempts to promote development in the Third World. Fundamentally, the rich countries aren't interested in the fate of the hungry unless they present a threat to their wealth. It has been estimated that if the rich countries (including the U.S.S.R. in this calculation) were seriously concerned with feeding the world's hungry, just 10% of the funds they devote to arms annually could have everybody fed within six months.

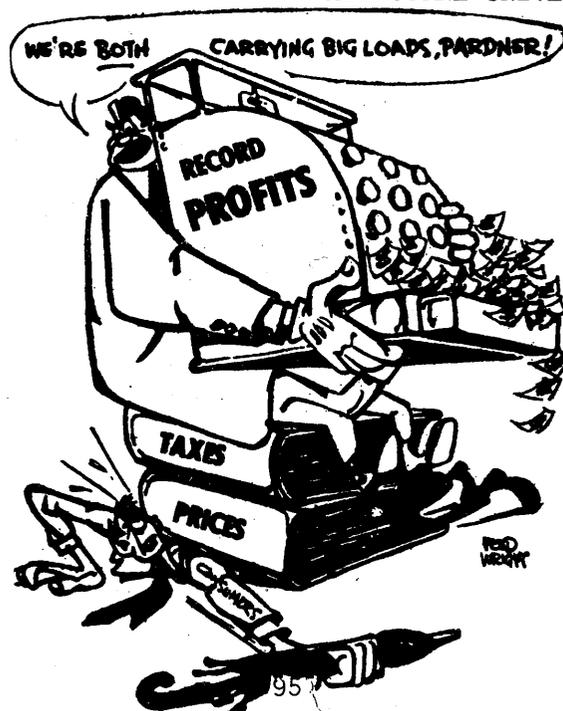
It should not be forgotten that the major producer of food in the world today is not any of the Third World countries, individually or collectively, but the U.S.A. In the course of the twentieth century, and above all in the years since World War II, the U.S. has evolved an unprecedentedly large-scale, technologically sophisticated, and vertically-integrated system of food production. Family farms have given way to 'agribusiness'. More and more, a few large companies control the entire process of food production and distribution, from the mining of fertilizer and the construction of farm equipment through to the marketing of the highly-processed product in vast supermarket and take-away food store chains. By the early 1970's farming in America had become an industry so concentrated that 4% of all farms produced more than 50% of all food. Food production has become a thoroughly industrialised process, with farming merely a technique for transforming one series of industrial products into another series of products (which happen to be edible). Farming is just one link in a long chain, of no more intrinsic importance than printing labels for the final product.

Like the Green Revolution in underdeveloped countries, the emergence of agribusiness had its casualties. Millions of farmers have been displaced from the land, and a whole rural social order and way of life has been largely destroyed. In the richest country in the world in the early 1970's, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, ten to twelve million Americans were 'starving or sick because they have too little money to spend on food'. Many of these were in depressed rural areas. As in the Third World, in the heartland of capitalism food production and hunger can grow side by side.

American agribusiness prides itself on its efficiency and productivity. Indeed, one of its central problems is that it is too efficient, and constantly risks producing a 'surplus' which cannot be sold off at profitably high prices. Restriction of production, 'planned scarcity', is required by agribusiness to prevent a glut in the market. As a result tens of millions of acres of highly productive farmland have been withdrawn from use to enable prices to be maintained — and increased. It is a further indictment of the crazy logic of the capitalist market that profits are made by restricting food production in the midst of world-wide famine.

If I have any complaints about Susan George's guide to this maze of irrational rationality, they concern the books she didn't write rather than the one she did. How the Other Half Dies remains at the descriptive and empirical level and sticks to agriculture and food processing. As such, it is excellent, but it can only go so far. Time and time again she is led back to basic questions of the institutional structure of underdeveloped countries and of the world capitalist market as a whole which she does not attempt to answer. To do so, she would have had to go far beyond questions of food and hunger to analyse the whole historical process of capitalist expansion, the formation of the world market, and the impact of capitalist imperialism on pre-capitalist societies. Because she does not attempt such an analysis she is unable to offer any solution for underdeveloped countries except a vague plea for 'self-reliance'. Though pointing in the right direction, this raises more questions than it answers. But Susan George has not written a book on imperialism, or on strategies for economic development. She set out to document the causes of world hunger and has succeeded brilliantly. How the Other Half Dies is the best single guide to this topic available.

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC HISTORY
MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY



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