

Hunger and Public Action by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen
(Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1989), pp. xviii + 373,
\$US45.00, ISBN 0-19-828634-1.

Hunger and famines are not just about food production. Throughout history, there are many examples, including the 1974 Bangladesh famine, where the availability of food was actually at its highest levels. In other cases, such as the Irish famines of the 1840s, food continued to be exported while about an eighth of the nation's population starved to death (p. 22).

Disturbingly, these trends continue. In spite of the prevalence of famine, according to Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) statistics, in the past decade, increases in food output per head for the developing countries taken together, actually surpassed that of the developed countries taken together (p. 32). In specific famine-stricken countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where food production is declining, food continues to be exported.

Such events raise serious questions regarding why public action has been unable to avert this course of history to ensure an adequate and more equitable distribution of food. *Hunger and Public Action* is a study of these phenomena. A central thesis of the study is that hunger and famines are tied to complex sets of inter-related economic, social, political and cultural factors that must be understood in order to address the multiple conflicts that perpetuate hunger and deprivation. The book is one of a series of publications which is the outcome of the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) project on 'Hunger and Poverty', and which also includes a three-volume book, entitled *The Political Economy of Hunger*, edited by the authors.

Hunger and Public Action consists of 13 chapters, divided into four parts. Part I presents some general analysis and definitions of the economic, social, political and medical perspectives on nutrition and starvation in contemporary societies. More specifically, relationships between entitlement and deprivation, nutrition and capability, and society, class and gender are examined. Part II analyses strategies for famine prevention and entitlement protection, through an analysis of famines and social response mechanisms, the role of markets and interventions and lessons learned from African and Indian case studies. Part III examines the complex inter-relationships and issues of production, entitlements and nutrition; economic growth and public support, including growth-mediated and support-led security strategies. Building on the results of these analyses, Part IV attempts to assemble an integrated view of hunger and public action, emphasising the role of the public not only as 'the patient', but also as 'the agent' for social change (p. 279).

In contrasting hunger in the modern world with the past, Drèze and Sen postulate that, not only is current hunger so unnecessary, but there are a number of other contrasts, including:

- 1) for a substantial part of humanity, food and resultant health problems which stem more from over- rather than under-consumption;
- 2) hunger in contemporary societies which is not only related to lack of affluence, but also social inequities;
- 3) the dependence of one group's ability to command food on its relative position and comparative economic power *vis-a-vis* other groups which is especially important in a market economy;

- 4) the importance of wage labour which is a particular aspect of the contemporary problem;
- 5) the rapid expansion of market exchange and significant developments in the condition of 'exchange with nature', such as food production, and
- 6) the importance of the state and policy in combating world hunger (pp. 5, 6).

In proposing strategies to overcome the threat of famine, the authors argue in favour of the strategies based on employment creation, particularly in the form of public works programmes and cash wages (p. 265). Similarly, for the elimination of regular hunger and undernutrition, Drèze and Sen suggest that entitlements and corresponding capabilities be promoted through the expansion of private incomes on a widespread basis, as well as through improved health care, education and food (p. 267).

However, methods to implement these strategies are almost totally ignored. Instead, Drèze and Sen simplistically and rather naively refer to the value of pluralist political systems and a free press as major catalysts for public action, as if these factors in themselves are sufficient to generate the necessary changes. These are offered in place of more detailed exploration of other systemic factors, such as the links between famine, ecological decline, war, and the continuing structural economic crisis compounded by debt burden, tariffs and subsidy issues, all of which severely impact on wages and employment, and thus entitlements and capabilities. Other factors under-represented in their analysis include links between human rights and entitlements (manifest as issues even in politically pluralist societies) and the impact of technology transfer on levels of employment and skill requirements.

Further, the authors have chosen to support their observations and arguments through rather technically-constructed analyses and a sophisticated text, which includes an array of tables and graphs. In doing so, they have not succeeded in their endeavour to make the book as "non-technical and accessible as possible".

Although *Hunger and Public Action* clearly is not directed to the layperson, it, nevertheless, should be of interest to the professional in the field. Particularly impressive in the book's comprehensive 76 page bibliography.

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The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress by Joel Mokyr
(Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp. ix + 349, \$39.95, ISBN 0 19 5061136.

The Lever of Riches is an important book deserving close attention from students of the historical process that not so long ago was unashamedly called progress. Joel Mokyr is professor of economics and history at Northwestern University and author of *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution* (1985). The present work harvests the scholarship ripened in that endeavour by undertaking a systematic cross-cultural, longitudinal study of the causes and conditions of economic growth.

A central contention of this study is that contemporary microeconomics lacks the conceptual equipment to elucidate the increment to economic growth supplied