Hunger and Ideology

Nick Eberstadt

World hunger is not only a material problem, but an intellectual problem as well. To an extent we do not fully recognize, the hunger which stalks millions of wretched families and homeless drifters is related to a lack of understanding and a want of ingenuity.

These are not failings of the poor themselves. Quite the contrary: anyone who has spent time in the villages of Asia can testify that the world's greatest economists are the illiterate women, for somehow they manage to keep their families fed on what seem like impossibly small budgets. The problem lies at precisely the opposite end of the social spectrum, with the well-educated, well-paid, and well-meaning functionaries who are meant to attend to world poverty and the desperate hunger it causes. These men and women do not lack the funds with which to make greater inroads against severe want, nor do they lack the good will of the world's free and affluent peoples. What they lack, quite simply, is understanding. Their misinterpretations of the world food situation are frequently so fundamental as to impede significantly the effort to eliminate malnutrition.

To be sure, there are some valid reasons for the confusion which surrounds this subject. Much of the information we must work with is inadequate. There are for example discrepancies of nearly fifteen million tons—about as much as Bangladesh uses to feed itself—between U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates on food-grain exports from developed countries—and those are estimates that are relatively easy to compile and relatively error-free. Evaluations of the severity of hunger are likewise dogged by ambiguity: depending on the assumptions, one can "prove" that the average Bengali needs nearly 2,400 calories a day, or only 1,600.

Most of our confusion, however, arises not from inexactitudes like these but from ideological argu-

Widespread and Growing Hunger. With few exceptions, authorities in the fight against world hunger depict the situation as almost unimaginably bad. FAO figures suggest that about half-a-billion people in the less developed countries (excluding China) suffer from a malnutrition so acute that they would probably be hospitalized if they lived in Europe or the United States. The World Bank estimates that about three-fifths of the families in poor non-Communist nations—nearly one-and-a-half-billion people—do not get enough food to fill their caloric needs. Robert McNamara, the Bank's president, has stated that 30 million children die of starvation each year. Tens of millions who survive, moreover, are said to be permanently crippled by irreversible, hunger-induced brain damage. As far as these experts can tell, the situation is getting no better; in fact, despite thirty years of relief programs backed up by relatively rapid economic growth, the poor world may be getting even hungrier.

Such shocking assessments may be consistent with the politics of budgetary requests within the hunger industry. They are certainly consistent with the apocalyptic preachings of those who claim the world is currently unable to feed itself, and who place the blame on anything from the incontinence of the poor to the irredeemable rotteness of capitalism. But they are quite simply inconsistent with the most basic and readily obtainable facts on the world's food situation.

McNamara's assertion, for example, is flatly wrong. Demographic figures are subject to consid-

Nick Eberstadt is a visiting fellow at the Harvard Center for Population Studies. He is the author of Poverty in China, and the editor of Fertility Decline in the Less Developed Countries. This essay is part of a larger study of ideology and the world food problem. Mr. Eberstadt would like to thank David Dapice, Thomas Poleman, and Peter Timmer for their advice on an earlier draft.
able uncertainty, but no serious estimate of the annual number of child deaths would be higher than 17 million; and a more reasonable figure would probably be 15 million.* This would include deaths from all causes: accidents, trauma, maternal neglect, bad sanitary conditions, and lack of medical care. Even if hunger were completely eliminated, many—perhaps more than half—of these tragic deaths would continue. McNamara's claim, then, is something like four times too high.

Likewise, the lament that countless numbers of unfortunate in the poor world are mentally deficient is a rhetorical convenience. For better or worse, human beings are not nearly so frail as doctors, social planners, and other concerned administrators sometimes assume. As Lewis Thomas once wrote, "Far from being ineptly put together, we are amazingly tough, durable organisms, full of health, ready for most contingencies." Rather than collapsing at the first sign of adversity, the human body protects itself from environmental insult and protects especially the two systems most necessary for survival, the organs of reproduction and of thought. John Bongaarts has shown that women's fertility is basically unaffected by nutrition until the point where they are beset by starvation; when they would not be able to provide for their newborn. As for mental activity, Rose Frisch once demonstrated that every important experiment proving the connection between mild or moderate malnutrition and human brain damage is embarrassingly flawed in construction or interpretation. Subsequent analyses support her conclusions. In reality, if one is so starved that one's brain will be seriously and irreversibly damaged one is not likely to live to tell about it.†

Authoritative estimates of the prevalence of hunger may be numbingly grim, but when we bring ourselves to look at them squarely we learn that they are superficial and deceptive. Take the World Bank's count. With the Bank's "Reutlinger-Selowsky" malnutrition methodology, one comes to the chilling conclusion that something like three-fifths of the people in low-income countries live under the shadow of "caloric deficits." On inspection, however, the numbers this formula churns out prove meaningless. In Taiwan, for example, caloric deprivation would be ascribed to 48 percent of the population; in Hong Kong, to 46 percent. This sounds serious indeed, until one learns that life expectancy in both places is over seventy-two—about the same, in fact, as in Finland or Austria.

As this might suggest, the World Bank method is unable to assess the incidence of hunger in a useful way. This formula, and others which imitate it, implicitly insists that anyone eating less than some fixed nutritional average must be underfed. Forgotten is the obvious fact that human needs vary. This is a simple mistake, and it is not a new one. In the depths of the Depression, Sir Arthur Bowley announced that the United Kingdom was in the midst of a nutritional emergency: according to his figures, about half the country was ingesting less than the average caloric requirement. The government politely rejected his report, pointing out that about half the country would probably need less than the average caloric requirement by definition. This may have been obvious in the 1930's, but it seems to escape most of our hunger experts today.

FAO figures are no better. In 1950, the FAO's director, Lord Boyd-Orr, wrote that two-thirds of mankind lived with the threat of hunger. His report apparently based its conclusion on a simple computational error, a transposition of columns. Though the mistake was pointed out, it was never corrected, or even officially acknowledged. In the more than thirty years since that gaffe the FAO has not done much to improve its reputation for attention to detail and respect for accuracy. Most of the data and calculations in its first three World Food Surveys, the last of them released in 1963, are still not available for outside inspection. In 1974 an unexplained revision in methodology raised the FAO estimate of the incidence of serious hunger from 360 million to 434 million—or from exactly 20 percent to exactly 25 percent of the Third World—just in time for the World Food Conference. Currently the FAO computes its hunger figures with a modified version of the World Bank Reutlinger-Selowsky formula.**

Hunger, it seems, is not as easy to measure as we might have thought. It is difficult to find out how much the poor actually eat, for one of the hallmarks of poverty is social invisibility. If we did know how much the poor were eating, though, we still might not know how hungry they were. Food needs vary from person to person, often by 50 percent, not infrequently by 100 percent. Food needs also vary for any given person over time, depending on whether or not he is sick: intestinal bacteria, for example, may eat as much as 10 percent of any Bengali child's meal. And food needs vary with the availability of food. The body can metabolize what it consumes with

† This does not mean that we can afford to be complacent about the plight of the wretched and the disposed of. Rather, it means that there is still hope for the tens of millions whose lives are dominated by desperate poverty. In 1950 nutritional and economic levels in South Korea and what is now Bangladesh were about the same. This did not prevent the South Koreans from learning the skills which were to facilitate one of the quickest and most dramatic escapes from poverty in the history of nations.
** See Thomas T. Poleman, Quantifying the Nutritional Situation in Developing Countries. Cornell University Agricultural Staff Paper, 1979.
greater or lesser efficiency, depending on need: we seldom use or store as much as 40 percent of the food energy in the things we eat.

If we wanted to get a meaningful impression of the extent of hunger, we might start by looking at the results of eating patterns. What nutritionists call "anthropometric" tests, such as weight-for-age and weight-for-height readings or measurements of arm and head circumference can tell us important things about the nutritional well-being of a population. By the time they are five, for example, Guatemalan Indian children are shorter and lighter than the children of Central African Pygmies (although what is called "catch-up growth" eliminates this difference later on).

Unfortunately, anthropometric data can be easily misinterpreted. If Asian boys and girls are measured against an American or Swedish ideal, the findings will probably be meaningless. One recent AID study painted a sorry picture of Sri Lanka: by American height and weight references, 42 percent of the nation's children were moderately or severely malnourished; less than 10 percent were "normal." If these researchers had bothered to measure life spans, however, they would have found that the average Sri Lankan can expect to live nearly seventy years, or about as long as the average Belgian in 1968. At that time the Belgians were the most abundantly fed people on earth, with only a few thousand derelicts and vagrants among them thought to be hungry.

Evidently, it is possible to be "small but healthy," to borrow a phrase from David Seckler. Most nutritionists do not seem to appreciate this.

A proper examination of serious hunger might relate such things as height and weight to death rates—which has hardly ever been done. In this connection the findings of Lincoln Chen and his colleagues at the Cholera Research Laboratory in Bangladesh are instructive.* In the district of Matlab Bazaar, death rates for children typed as "normal," "mildly malnourished," and "moderately malnourished" were all about the same—in fact, "normal" children died slightly more frequently than did their smaller and lighter playmates. But children who were "severely malnourished"—those 40 percent or more below their "reference weight"—died in droves: their mortality rates were four to six times higher than for all other boys and girls the same age. This would certainly suggest that attention be concentrated first on the fraction of he world's population that is severely underfed.

How large would that fraction be? According to a World Health Organization survey a decade back, almost ten million children under five were "seriously malnourished" by anthropometric criteria. Obviously, that number vastly understates the full extent of serious hunger: some children will always be misclassified: at any point the number dangerously hungry will be lower than for the year as a whole, owing to the rhythm of the harvest and the vagaries of parental fortune; boys and girls do not develop an immunity to hunger on their fifth birthday. To correct for these biases, and to take account of China, Indochina, and North Korea, which are usually excluded from such studies, we should probably multiply this figure by an order of magnitude, and put the world's desperately hungry population at something like 100 million.

Attending to about 100 million people spread across perhaps ninety or a hundred countries would be an enormous task, but a manageable one. Concerted international action could conceivably eliminate the most horrifying manifestations of hunger in a matter of years. By reciting inflated figures which have already lost their shock value, hunger experts risk making the problem seem hopelessly large.

Of course, simply preventing the desperately needy from succumbing to death by starvation can in no sense be construed as a fully satisfactory solution to the hunger problem. There is a world of difference between being kept alive and living; checking deadly hunger is only a first step. Many tens of millions of families who do not show up in the rosters of stark malnutrition would choose to eat more if only they had the money. In this sense, the hunger problem will not be resolved until involuntary hunger of all degrees is eliminated—though even then nutritional troubles can be expected to persist, if of an entirely different nature and severity.

**Three** final points should be made about serious hunger. First, while we think of it as an Asian problem, the incidence of severe malnutrition is highest in black Africa. This is reflected, if imperfectly, by a consistent and alarmingly high incidence of acute nutritional deprivation as revealed by anthropometric testing, and by a life expectancy which for black Africa as a whole falls about six years below India's. Whatever India's problems may be, its peoples can rely on a highly sophisticated government apparatus which has both the ability and the inclination to deal with sudden hunger. Few Africans are so fortunate.

Second, severe hunger is a greater problem for the countryside than for the city, both in absolute and relative terms. To be sure, urban hunger is

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more visible, more dangerous politically, and more immediately influenced by the limited tools available to poor governments. Throughout the poor world, however, it is villagers who are the more needy. The hunger which Western visitors encounter in the big cities of the poor world is shocking enough, but the fact of the matter is that children grow more slowly, and end up smaller and lighter, in the countryside. They also die earlier: in India, for example, a person born into the comparatively easy routine of city life can expect to live about ten years longer than one who must work and eat in the country.

Finally, prognostications notwithstanding, the world hunger situation does seem to be improving. If 100 million is about the right figure for those threatened with dangerous hunger, this would be slightly more than 2 percent of the world’s population: a lower fraction, in all likelihood, than for any previous generation in man’s recorded history. In the past thirty years, life expectancy in the less developed countries, excluding China, has risen by more than a third (and China’s may be up by 50 percent). In the past twenty years in these same nations, death rates for one-to-four-year-olds, the age group most vulnerable to nutritional setback, have dropped by nearly half.

This does not mean that hunger and ill health have disappeared from the poor world: the nearly twenty-year gap in life expectancies between the rich and the poor nations is grim testimony that they have not. The fact that much remains to be done, however, should not blind us to the progress that has been made or to the very real possibility that we are now within striking distance of eliminating the most extreme forms of hunger.

Growing and inevitable scarcity. To solve a problem we must understand its causes. Several of the important “schools of thought” concerning the hunger problem deter us from doing this.

Take the Malthusian position, recently embraced by no less prestigious a document than the Global 2000 report prepared for President Carter. In its strictest construction, this argument holds that since there are too few goods and resources to go around, poverty and hunger are inevitable. Man’s insatiable appetites, in this view, have outrun the capacities of our fragile ecosystem to sustain them; if disaster is to be avoided we must ruthlessly cut back the wealth of the rich world and the fertility of the poor.

The case against this position is so thorough that it is hard to know where to begin. Perhaps a good place would be the current, global availability of food. Let us disregard for a moment such things as tubers, vegetables, fruit, nuts, legumes, sugars, food oils, fish, and range-raised livestock. Even without these, food-grain production by itself could satisfy not only the caloric needs of the entire world population, but of a billion people beyond. This is a conservative estimate.

Moreover, as the worldwide decline in mortality might suggest, food is not becoming scarcer. Since 1950 worldwide per-capita food production has risen by about 40 percent, according to the USDA. Even the FAO admits the situation has improved dramatically, although by its count the rise is less than 30 percent. Since consumers prefer meat, vegetables, and sweet foods to cereals and root crops, this means that man’s diet has also improved in quality and digestibility.

The benefits of progress, however, are never evenly spread. By conventional measures, poor nations have profited less than rich ones from the postwar prosperity. Even so, the poor world seems to be on a course toward greater abundance. Over the past twenty-five years, grain production per person in the less developed world (again excluding China) rose by about 13 percent.

This figure significantly understates the increase in overall availability, for in that same period the trade position of the less developed nations shifted from one of rough self-sufficiency to a heavy reliance on food imports. Whatever else this may have done, it necessarily increased the amount of food available for consumption. If FAO and USDA figures can be relied on, caloric intake, to say nothing of diet quality, has improved in each major region of the poor world over each decade—except perhaps for China. When caloric need is measured in terms of functional requirements rather than aesthetic ideals, the only nation whose food supplies unquestionably fall short is Cambodia, whose leaders deliberately induced agricultural disaster. Hunger in the poor nations, then, would seem to be neither necessary nor inevitable.

Contrary to Malthusian doctrine, there is no measurable evidence that global agricultural production is pushing against environmentally determined limits. While it is true that poorly managed farms and pastures are degrading the soil in Nepal, the Sahel, and elsewhere, there is nothing inevitable about this deterioration: improved cultivation and conservation practices could restore them, as agronomists at the Rockefeller Foundation and elsewhere have shown. If anything, agricultural resources are becoming less scarce. Between 1950 and 1980, thanks to the persistent and careful work of farmers, the world’s arable area—that fraction fit for cultivation—grew by more than 20 percent, and at an even more rapid rate in the poor countries as a whole. In the decade ending in 1977, the world’s irrigated acreage shot up more than 25 percent.

As for fertilizer, pesticide, seeds, and simple machinery, perhaps the best measure of scarcity is price (after all, prices in some sense are meant to indicate relative scarcity). Adjusting for inflation, we find that such prices have dropped meaning-
fully in the past thirty years, often by more than 50 percent. Only energy is more expensive today than it was thirty years ago, and this is a commodity for which a scarcity has been deliberately contrived.

A final measure of scarcity in world agriculture might seem to be the export prices of American wheat and corn, which underpin the international food market. Adjusting for inflation, we find that these cost less now than in the early 1960s—or in any earlier period, for that matter. And this is not because American farmers have been marginalized; last year per-capita income for U.S. agricultural workers surpassed that for non-agricultural workers.

What Malthusians always forget is that social and economic systems are not static and inflexible. Ours is an age of innovation, and innovations tend to find uses for materials which were previously valueless: sand, bauxite, petroleum. Innovations also tend to occur precisely in response to shortages. We should not conclude that innovation offers us the panacea that proponents of technological utopias sometimes claim: new ideas and inventions do not appear on request; technological change has a social cost, which can be very high; and innovation is a long-term process, while many of man's most troublesome problems press him in the short term. Nevertheless, given the flexibility and creativity of the modern economy, ours may actually prove to be an age of increasing availability of resources. As Julian Simon has pointed out, the "ultimate resource" is human talent, and this is a resource which grows through being used. Praetorian sterilization programs or forced reductions in living standards are not the means to encourage its utilization.

OMINOUS FOOD DEFICITS. To many development experts, the increasing reliance on foreign grain in the poor world is cause for alarm. Last year the net imports of the less developed countries (including China) totaled nearly 70 million tons, up from about 20 million tons in 1960; this group had been essentially self-sufficient in the early 1950s, and had exported a net of about 10 million tons in the 1980s. Sterling Wortman and Ralph Cummings, authors of the otherwise sober To Feed This World, term this a trend of "ominous food deficits," and a report of the International Food Policy Research Institute concludes, with a mixture of horror and disbelief, that if trends continue the poor regions, exclusive of China, might import as much as 120 million tons of grain by 1990. Implicit is the notion that imports by themselves are proof that a nation can no longer feed itself, or that it has lost its race against population.

The economists and agronomists who urge the less developed countries to restore their import independence view the reliance on outside food both as a sign of hunger and as a hindrance to development. But their analysis is fundamentally flawed. It confuses biological need with economic demand, two things which have nothing to do with each other. Purchases reflect the choices of those who have money to spend; they do not necessarily signify the satisfaction of an irreducible minimum of needs. Taiwan's 18 million people purchase more American food than Africa's 400 million; this is not because they are more hungry. Conversely, the current net export positions of Burundi, Burma, and India should not be taken to mean that these nations have finally eliminated malnutrition.

By the same token, a nation's dependence on foreign food tells us nothing by itself about its development prospects. Rising food deficits did not prevent Israel and Japan from achieving spectacular rates of economic growth. On the other hand, a rising volume of food exports has not stopped Argentina from sliding back into the Third World.

It would be a mistake to assume that food imports cripple less developed countries financially. The so-called "developing market economies"—the poor world minus OPEC, China, and the smaller Communist states—sold more than $250 billion of goods and services last year. Their net food-grain bill amounted to about $10 billion, or something like 4 percent of their exports. For the poorest nations within this configuration, the food-grain burden was higher, but even they could pay for their purchases with less than 10 percent of their exports. (At the height of the 1972-74 food crisis, grain purchases absorbed less than 15 percent of the poorest nations' merchandise earnings.)

Despite their growing reliance on overseas food, poor nations have been able to cover their purchases with an ever shrinking fraction of their own overseas earnings. In 1960, food—a category in which grain is a relatively small component—was 15 percent of the import bill of the "middle-income countries," and 22 percent of the bill of "low-income countries." By 1977 the proportions were 12 percent and 16 percent respectively. To be sure, less developed countries face some serious financial problems, but it does seem that the poor world could afford to finance even more "ominous" food deficits than it presently does, if it were so inclined.

But why has food production in the poor world lagged behind articulated demand? The answer has little to do with an absolute inability to produce. Nor do "alarmingly" high rates of population growth bear much responsibility for this. It can be explained, rather, in terms of a specific set of choices made by almost every regime in the poor world in the period of decolonization and national self-assertion.

The nationalist leaders who came to power after
World War II through the break-up of the old empires differed remarkably in their ideologies—
one need only compare Nehru, say, with Sukarno or Ho Chi Minh—but on one point they were
united: they did not wish to remain weak appendages of the powerful states which had controlled
them. Their common ambition was to build powerful, "modern" state apparatuses which would
allow their nations, or at least their national elites, to deal on equal terms with their former
masters. They would of course provide themselves with all the trappings of national power: airports,
sports arenas, presidential palaces. But they would also build up an industrial base, even if
rapid industrialization was not economically wise.

Huge discrepancies in rates of return did not prevent the national elites from sanctioning a
massive build-up of the "modern" sector at the ex-
panse of the vast majority of the population who
lived in the countryside and worked on the land.
Agricultural research was neglected, and prices
and taxes skewed against the farmer to hasten the
growth of cities and factories.

As a result, a peculiar system of comparative ad-
Vantage has arisen. In poor nations where wages
are low and the large majority of the labor force
works in the fields, farmers cannot produce food
as cheaply as their counterparts in North America.
The Indian agricultural sector, for example, uses
as much energy as the American, but it produces
only a third as much food; it now costs a farmer
about 40 percent more to grow a ton of wheat
in the Punjab than in Kansas. On the other hand,
with new, state-of-the-art factories, cheap work
forces, hidden subsidies, and frequently insuffi-
cient domestic markets, it is in the interests of the
poor nations to export processed goods: India, for
example, can forge a ton of steel for half as much
as the Ruhr. Thus it makes sense for poor nations
to trade their finished products for cheap Western
food.*

Today's policies, which favor the city over the
country and the factory over the field, are likely to
impede the elimination of malnutrition. In suc-
cumbing to what Michael Lipton has termed
"urban bias," politicians and professors in the
poor world have skewed income distribution by
financing the comfort of teamsters and physicists
at the expense of blacksmiths and plowmen. By
misallocating investments, they slow down eco-
nomic growth. Other things being equal, this
means the poor will be hungrier. The few poor
countries which have refused to favor their urban
minorities at the expense of the rural majority—
Taiwan, South Korea, Malawi, the Ivory Coast—
are all in better economic and nutritional shape
than neighbors who have so favored their cities—
the Philippines, North Korea, Tanzania, Ghana.
Eliminating the disadvantages under which ag-
riculture in the less developed countries must op-
erate would no doubt narrow income differences
and speed economic growth, although hunger
might not be reduced as substantially as we might
first assume. By virtue of such reforms a nation's
grain trade deficit might well decline. If hunger
on earth were effectively eliminated, some regions
of today's poor world would undoubtedly revert to
self-sufficiency, and others would even generate a
net food surplus. But many countries could and
would undoubtedly accumulate an even larger
grain-trade deficit than they have today. And there
would be nothing new about such an arrange-
ment. In many of today's rich nations, elimination
of hunger was facilitated by reliance on food sur-
pluses from other lands, for this permitted an ac-
celeration of economic growth through an escape
from the bind of agricultural self-sufficiency.

The superiority of the "socialist" system. Still another current belief is that "capitalism" is an inferior tool in the fight
against hunger, while "socialism" is an effective one.† According to this argument, capitalism is
crippled by an inherently exploitative system of
relations which tends to cause growing inequalities,
and to produce either nutritional stagnation or
hunger crises in the less developed countries. By
contrast, "socialism" is said to be more rational,
more efficient, oriented toward human develop-
ment rather than profit, and grounded in the secu-
8rity of central planning. For these reasons, the
argument continues, the "socialist strategy" has
made strides against desperate want which "cap-
talist" nations have been unable to match.

Although this argument is Marxist in conception,
It has won respectability among a wide range
of thinkers and policy-makers who do not consider
themselves radicals or even men of the Left. By
1975, for example, no less a figure than McGeorge
Bundy was arguing that the success of the Chinese
and Cuban experiments should make us rethink
our old notions about economic development.

Rather than arguing about the theoretical mer-
its of "socialism" versus "capitalism," let us com-
pare the nutritional records of Communist and
non-Communist nations. Evaluating Communist
efforts to eliminate hunger is not a straightforward
exercise. Communist states oppose the free flow of
information under the best of circumstances; they

* Industrialization seems to have played less of a role in this transformation in Africa than in either Latin America
or Asia. In Africa, the unhappy results described below appear to have more to do with the growth of a class of
parasitic bureaucrats and the inappropriate extension of
cash-cropping. Michael Lofchie addresses the latter prob-

† Honors meaning was long ago beaten out of both of these terms. In standard usage the second now seems to be
shorthand for "the current practices of Marxist-Leninist
regimes," while the first can seemingly be applied to non-
Communist systems as different as Morocco and Sweden.
should not be expected to promote discussions of their system's shortcomings. Measuring Communist and non-Communist nations against each other, moreover, is complicated by the fact that some of the nations we would wish to compare were never really comparable. (Against whom do we judge the Mongolian People's Republic, for example? Turkey? Nepal? South Korea?) Nevertheless, state-sanctioned statistics, refugee accounts, and reports from those few invited visitors with sharp eyes and open minds do permit a telling if imperfect reconstruction of the Communist nations' performance on the hunger front.

A brief summary will suffice. Before the first Five Year Plan in the late 1920's Soviet Russia could be ranked as a peer of Finland or Japan by some agricultural and nutritional measures; by a few it was even ahead. Today it lags embarrassingly behind: its agricultural sector is stricken by chronic and continuous failure; its consumers suffer perennial shortages not just of meat, fruit, and vegetables, but of such "luxury" goods as lard; its infant-mortality rate, unlike any in the Western world, is rising, thanks in no small part to diseases of nutritional deficiency like rickets.

Before World War II, Spain, Greece, and Italy's "mezzogiorno" were all hungrier than Czechoslovakia or Hungary; thirty-five years into the Eastern European experiment in "people's democracy," they are healthier. When Korea was partitioned, the North was richer and better fed: it possessed about 95 percent of the peninsula's industry, and had just been unburdened by the flight of 5 million citizens to the already impoverished South. After a generation of "socialist development," it is clearly now the South Koreans who are richer and better fed. As one might expect of a nation of a billion people, China's performance differs from one region to the next. Today, however, even mainlanders refer to Taiwan as "China's leading province": it has set the pace in all areas of material progress, including the reduction of hunger.

Over the past generation Thailand has come close to solving its hunger problem; by all accounts neighboring Laos, which was much poorer at the time of its "liberation," has become even hungrier since then. "Unified" Vietnam seems to have dealt with its hunger problem by casting its extra mouths into the sea. The nutritional plight of Cambodia is too familiar to require any description.

The performance of Marxist-Leninist regimes in Africa is difficult to judge for a number of reasons, including the fact that total control over their economies and societies has yet to be established, but at first blush Africa's hungry and neglected peoples do seem to have fared better under the would-be totalitarians than under any of the less ambitious forms of government on that continent.

* Of all the "socialist experiments," only two provide evidence of nutritional results noticeably better than their non-Communist neighbors: Soviet Central Asia and Cuba. Whether total colonization by a European power would have provided Afghanistan or Iran with material results comparable to those produced by total Russian colonization in Turkménia, Uzbekistan, or the ill-fated Kazakh Republic, we cannot say: nothing like that was even attempted. As for Cuba, the underpinnings of its success are artificial. Aside from Cambodia and the Yemen People's Democratic Republic, Cuba is the only nation in the world with a smaller per-capita GNP today than thirty years ago. It could not possibly survive, let alone function, without enormous annual subsidies from the Soviet Union. The USSR's current grant to its Cuban showpiece is thought to be half as large as Cuba's internally generated GNP.

Socialist regimes have good reason to want their people healthy and well fed: a debilitated labor force, after all, can only impede the attainment of economic targets or political and military objectives. Total command over economy and society, moreover, can indeed be used to produce impressive and immediate material results. Under the aegis of the totalitarian state, land can be redistributed quickly and without legal obstacle; staples can be rationed, and their prices set artificially low; workers can be mobilized, and employment created, by fiat. In the People's Republic of China in the early 1950's such policies contributed to a substantial rise in living standards for the poorest half of the population. But if we can believe China's current leaders, over the next quarter-cen-
tury living standards rose only slightly and erratically.

Total control over economy and society cuts both ways. In and of itself, it does not serve to augment resources. Instead, it concentrates power, and most frequently this impedes rather than expedites the augmentation of resources. If it can make land reform or rationing easier, it always makes it more difficult to promote technological innovation, accelerate worker productivity, or encourage flexible, creative, and efficient responses to unforeseen problems. The poor and the hungry may benefit from this tradeoff, but only on occasion, and seldom in the long run.

But the dangers of total power are not merely measured in forgone opportunities for progress. There is another aspect to "socialist policy" which nutritionists and development experts seldom confront directly.

Over the course of the 20th century there has been a noticeable and distinctly unpleasant change in the character of severe hunger. In the past, famines were usually the result of bad harvests or economic crises; increasingly, they can be traced to deliberate acts of government. With the rise in power and sophistication of the modern state apparatus, governments can now save their peoples from desperate hunger in a way which was impossible in the 19th century. When India's harvests failed in the mid-1960's, for example, a concerted Indian-American relief effort prevented a famine which all observers agree would have caused tens of millions of deaths. Thanks to these joint relief actions, in fact, there was no statistically observable rise in death rates in the drought-afflicted provinces.

A powerful and sophisticated state apparatus, however, can also use hunger as a weapon of assault against its enemies. There have been at least six such massive famines in the last fifty years. The hunger generated by the Soviet collectivization drive killed at least 6 million people; the starvation attendant on the Nazi atrocities, perhaps the same number; the man-made famine in Bengal in 1943, perhaps 3 million; the Biafran famine, at least 1 million; the ongoing Cambodian famine, as many as 2 million from a total population of 7 or 8 million; and China's "Three Lean Years," the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, may have taken a toll running into the tens of millions.

Each of these famines was government-sponsored; some were even officially planned. The scale of the cruelty involved is perhaps suggested by comparison with the Sahelian famine in West Africa in the early 1970's, which was a "natural" disaster. While authoritative analyses of this tragedy tell us that the death toll from the drought will never be known precisely, they also suggest that its cost in terms of human life should be measured in thousands, not hundreds of thousands.*

It is a fact of modern life that governments across the spectrum of political inclination have inflicted starvation on their peoples by design. But the regimes which have made the most consistent practice of this call themselves "socialist." Moreover, these are the only regimes to do so on principle. Armed with a philosophy which can turn even their most enthusiastic supporters into "enemies of the people," and which can then justify their elimination by whatever means necessary, and lacking the internal checks which might at least moderate officially sanctioned acts of cruelty, the "socialist" states have pioneered in inflicting needless hunger on helpless populations.

More complicated than a comparison of Communist and non-Communist regimes would be a comparison of the results of "socialist"—i.e., Fabian—economic policy in the poor world with "capitalism." Sri Lanka, for example, pursued Fabian policies until quite recently; economically these may have failed, yet just as clearly they should be credited with social success. With a per-capita income which appears no greater than India's, Sri Lankans have a life expectancy about fifteen years longer. By contrast, Michael Manley's variant of "socialism" in Jamaica appears to have retarded both economic and social progress.

As for laissez-faire capitalism, this has worked well-publicized wonders in Hong Kong over the past generation, yet its results have been far less impressive in neighboring Macao. By the same token, the three black African nations which have strayed least from orthodox capitalism—Botswana, Malawi, and the Ivory Coast—have all outperformed their neighbors, but by seemingly rather different margins.

The comparative strengths of "socialist" democracy and a more rigorously defined "capitalism" in the fight against hunger is perhaps a subject which has received too little attention. Too much attention, however, has been given to Communist anti-poverty strategies. The notion that encouraging, or even acquiescing in, the growth of totalitarian governance in the poor nations will help eradicate hunger is a chimera. Everything we have learned in the past ten years suggests that Communist states are consistently, and perhaps necessarily, worse at feeding their peoples than their "capitalist" competitors.

If we were to shake off our blinders on the subject of world hunger, we would see three important things about it.

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* See in particular John C. Caldwell, The Sahelian Drought and Its Demographic Implications (Overseas Educational Institute, 1975). In Caldwell's words, "Better roads, greater commercialization of the whole region, more awareness of what was happening . . . and massive international relief efforts all helped the people's own efforts and reduced a potentially murderous period into a very painful one."
First, despite the blunders, caprices, and ruinous plan of so many of their leaders, the people of the poor nations are eating better today than ever before. Controlling the worst manifestations of hunger, at least in the non-Communist world, is no longer an impossible undertaking.

Second, where desperate poverty and want have been eradicated, it has not been through population control, artificially enforced food self-sufficiency, or “socialist strategies,” but through the hard work of millions of men and women scattered on tiny farms, in dull villages, in dirty metropolises and suburban shantytowns, who are determined to improve their own lives and whose governments have given them the wherewithal to do so.

Finally, the United States is in a unique position to facilitate the global escape from poverty and to hasten the day when desperate hunger is eliminated. There are, in fact, a number of things we could be doing today which would measurably improve the world’s nutritional status. We have not undertaken any of them, perhaps for want of the idea.

**What would these be? I will list seven of them here:**

1. Promoting rural industry. The Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Koreans can attest to the crucial role that rural industrialization plays in the acceleration of economic growth and the elimination of hunger. In most of Asia and much of Latin America and Africa, population density places a limit on what can be expected from agriculture alone. A sound and balanced program of rural industry would provide not only the products farmers need to increase their productivity, but jobs and income for the landless laborers and displaced artisans who so frequently rank among the underfed. (A sound program of rural industry would also help stem the rush to the cities, since it would make possible the decent living which migrants leave home to find.) Much of the technology which would be needed would be simple, inexpensive, and amenable to local repair: “rotomeeders,” which roll through a rice paddy like a lawn mower; “biogas converters,” which catalyze compost into usable energy; low-horsepower pumps which could tap into a locally available energy source; and so forth. Paradoxically, many of these devices are too inexpensive for international industry to develop, for their very simplicity would imperil licensing and royalty arrangements.

2. Extension training. We have already helped establish a remarkable network of international agricultural-research centers which have brought the world new, high-yielding strains of wheat and rice and improved cultivation techniques for many other crops. In many parts of the poor world, this knowledge is not reaching the farmer. There are many reasons for this; one of them is a lack of “extension agents” capable of passing it on, and then serving as intellectual middlemen between scientists and small growers.

3. Grain insurance. Man cannot average his appetite across years or even seasons. In the parlance of economists, the “demand schedule” is highly inelastic. People have to have food to stay alive, and will pay for it what they can; thus even a relatively modest shortfall in supply can trigger explosive increases in prices. (During the “world food crisis” of the early 1970’s, for example, production never fell more than 3 percent below trend, and yet the cost of grain more than doubled in the international marketplace.) When prices go mad, food is bid out of the mouths of the hungry in much of the poor world. With America’s predominance over the world grain economy, the United States could easily champion an international grain-insurance program which would be well within the range of self-finance for the poor nations and whose benefits, both economic and humanitarian, would be substantial and demonstrable.

4. Trade reform. Reducing tariffs and otherwise liberalizing access to the enormous American market would increase exports, hence jobs, income, and presumably nutritional status in the less developed countries. At the same time, it would lower the cost of goods for the American consumer and provide our industries with much needed and potentially vitalizing competition.

5. Regulating infant foods. Many children in poor nations suffer from a syndrome which Derrick Jelliffe has labeled “commerciogenic malnutrition.” Mothers’ milk may be the best food for infants, but for a variety of reasons growing numbers of women in poor nations are choosing to feed their babies store-bought, processed formula. Many women who buy this cannot really afford to prepare it in adequate quantities and are unable to keep it hygienic; their children suffer for this. Our government could initiate an informal, international arrangement with infant food merchandisers to protect the poor and the ignorant against the misuse of such products. In the wake of our vote against the World Health Organization infant-formula proposals, we should have a special interest in doing so.

6. Lobbying for development. Obviously, the actions of governments in poor countries will be the primary constraint on the pace at which poverty and hunger are reduced. The United States has no ultimate say over price-support systems, educational strategies, investment policies, land-tenure arrangements, or patterns of administration in independent and sovereign nations. But we should not underestimate the positive influence we may exert through the instruments at our disposal. AID, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund can all create incentives for sound
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and honest governance, liberalized trade, rural development, and technological diffusion, and these are things which will help the poor and the hungry.

7. Moral pressure. Through various forums and international channels we should be castigating, embarrassing, isolating, and punishing governments which choose to starve their people. We should ask our allies to help us in doing this. And we should ask why "humanitarian" international organizations, upon which we lavish hundreds of millions of dollars, have been so silent about such abuses. The Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, sounded no alarms about Ethiopia's deliberate neglect of its famine-stricken provinces, or Indonesia's campaign of hunger against the Timorese, or the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese annihilation of Cambodia. Nor does this organization, which is charged with improving nutrition for the whole of mankind, seem to have any contingency plan for trying to feed the world's hungriest strata. Should it not be shamed for this delinquency?

The list could be continued, but the point should be clear by now. While only a fraction of the many problems of the poor world may be solved by well-meaning Westerners, and while most of the things the West can offer require time to manifest themselves, important, even crucial, opportunities to accelerate the elimination of hunger do exist. They will not be seized so long as we remain in thrall to hallucinatory ideas about the causes of hunger.