

The Political Ecology of the North Korean Famine: Revising Amartya Sen

The London School of Economics
May 25, 2005

I would like to thank Professors Howard Davis and John Sidel for allowing me the opportunity to give the first Sir Patrick Gillam Lecture. It is truly an honor to be here at this great institution, and to be part of an important lecture series which is designed to address **contemporary** issues of great relevance for world politics.

But ask a scholar to think contemporary—and her instinct is to reach back, and in this case to speak of an **ancient** scourge—**famine**—long signified by the fourth symbol of the black horse of the apocalypse. Famine is an **anachronism** in a modern world awash in surplus foodstuffs.

Lord John Russell, British Prime Minister at the time of the Irish potato famine, had remarked that it was as if “a famine of the 13th century were acting upon a population of the 19th,” and today I would like to speak of the same 13th century tragedy visiting itself upon the 21st century---and on a country that is another anachronism, **North Korea**: a communist monarchy, a Confucian anachronism—a country which is, I once heard someone say, “Stalinist on a good day.”

This double-anachronism, however, of a state-controlled economy that cannot feed its own people, and yet seeks the singular weapons that can create their own human scourge, serves as a Sword of Daemocles hanging over peace and democracy in East Asia. Anachronism thus has a curious way of making itself contemporary and relevant.

I became interested in the issue of the North Korea famine There was something about this famine that struck me as weird.

Monsoon Asia ... historically the lands of famine

India through Rudyard Kipling's *William the Conqueror*;

China through Pearl Buck's *Good Earth* ...

In our living memory, Bangladesh Famine of 1974 (1/4 to one million)

First Weird thing: extent of it: biblical proportion: JHSPH, interviewing refugees, 12 percent mortality rate, 2.5 Million excess deaths

Andrew Natsio in *The Great North Korean famine (US AID)*
Refugees representative

Let us compare this upper limit figure with the upper limit

... The Great Leap Famine of 1958-1961: 30 million / 600 million (5%)

... Great Bengal Famine of 1943, 3 million death (still not two digits)

Second weird thing: that famine wasn't supposed to happen.

... Historical understanding of famine is that

colonial times: Irish potato famine

war and revolution: Paris Commune, Germany WWI, seize of Stalingrad, Dutch hunger of 1944-1945, Famine in Greece in the early 1940s

socialist collectivization: Stalin's collectivization scheme and the ensuing famine in Ukraine and elsewhere—combined bad central planning, failed or violent agricultural reforms and on top of it, ethnic cleansing, to finish it off.

... Same in Asia

colonialism ... Japanese-occupied North Vietnam or Tonkin in 1944-1945, claiming between 500,000 to 2 million lives;

The United States in the Philippines in 1900 with systemic destruction of rice stores and livestock

British in India throughout its colonial history ... 1877 Indian Deccan & the afore-mentioned Great Bengal Famine of 1943.

War ... Cambodia in 1979, fear that 3 million might perish; Rosalyn Carter

Socialist Collectivization ... Mongolia, a Soviet decree for permanent settlement of nomads, 1930 and 1932

Vietnam in 1954 with upwards of 1 million dying of starvation

Big enchilada in China, 1958-1962.

... **North Korea anomaly ... weird:**

(1) It wasn't colonized or occupied---50 years after de-colonialization;

(2) It wasn't in war---More than 40 years after the Korean war,

(3) It wasn't in the midst of collectivization---40 years after collectivization.

... It had food-security and it worked, more or less

... Public distribution system that functioned more or less OK, and was highly egalitarian Feeding the country that was highly urban & industrial

So, the North Korean famine is a great anomaly—an **empirical** puzzle, and, I would argue in the rest of the talk, a **theoretical** puzzle, as well, in light of the theories on famines

... **Purpose**: Two folds

... Make sense of the most famous famine of the 1990s that was shown ...
generated relatively little scholarship

... To use it to revise our understanding about famine and poverty,
lights it throws

* * * * *

... But what **IS** our thinking about famine?

... Best represented by Amartya Sen... Nobel Prize ... strength of his work on
famine---"human entitlement approach" ---often called the best theory since

Malthus:

Comprehensive (traverse political, economic, social, ethical realm)

Sensible (in its public policy component, regarding famine relief)

Influential

.... Quickly go through four main aspects of his work on famine

--what it tells us and does not tell us about the famine in North Korea

--the myriad ways in which North Korea might enlighten us in return

[Slide One]

[1] Democracy and Famine: Democracies don't have famines

... Origins of this argument

India and China

... Growth, social safety net, health, nutrition, longer life
expectancy and lower child mortality ... wipes the floor with
India

... Skeletons in the Chinese cupboard, owing to its political
structure

... GLF: early 1980s, demographers were coming out with new evidence: China scholars were beating their breasts about how they should have spoken out more loudly.

... India

... Open journalism and adversarial politics

... Birth of an Iron law about famine studies

"Democracies Don't Have Famines" (iron law of security studies)

... To anticipate my argument---I don't believe that there is a simple correlation between famine and political regime type

Rather than *regime type*: political processes that immobilize attempts to alleviate problems of food shortage---NOT REGIME TYPE: **POLITICAL PROCESS**

[II] Argument against Food Availability Decline

Total food availability not a critical issue

Not really new (Famine Commission of 1880)

But the timing was brilliant.

Ethiopia and Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s

To anticipate my argument, I think he overstates the case ... highly stratified society like India, and in a market society, it is true ... total food availability is probably not a problem ... food can be abundant in the midst of misery and starvation

... Here is a rub: If in fact he is correct, that famines occur in non-democratic societies **Totalitarian, closed** society Relatively **egalitarian** Does it not stand to reason that absolute food availability **IS** a problem?

... And I am right, we need to search for reasons **WHY** there is absolute shortage of food, and not only on the problem of **ACCESS** to food.

[II] Entitlement Theory—tautological

Famine is a catastrophic loss of entitlement to acquiring food through

Production ... Trade ... Entitlement vis-à-vis the state

Entitlement protection system becomes critically important

What Professor Sen gives us here is a definition of famine (as catastrophic loss of entitlement) and less a theory of how famine occurs, in socialist countries

We need to understand how catastrophic system breakdown

... in other words, we need a **developmental** angle:

[IV] Social and economic consequences of famine;

Sen does not discuss this in his many works on famine

Huge consequences: Greco-Roman times, and true in North Korea, as well

Famine is a historical marker, for people don't forget hunger, and that's how they remember history: the years when they were hungry....

* * *

Before I go into details---great respect for Sen's work---best way to show this respect is to treat his work with utmost seriousness

... **At the end of the day**, it does not help us much in understanding the vexing phenomenon of famine in our time

... May lead us to odd policy conclusions, an issue to which I will return at the end of this talk.

* * * * *

Let us revisit the four main issues, one by one, with a longer glance at North Korea

(1) Political regime type—Free press and adversarial politics

... Cape Verde, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana Best able to avoid famine, through entitlement protection system, initiative and agency, early warning and early response, food supply management, private trade and public distribution:

... What constitutes a functioning multiparty democracy in developing world is no small question.

... Botswana: democratic, efficient administration

... Zimbabwe of Robert Mugabe; Kenya and Cape Verde? single party and an elected parliament

... Ethiopia & Sudan: "democratic" government of Sadiq el Mahdi

... The general idea that democratic and open societies are better able to avoid famine is common sense enough ... to elevate it to an iron law is a problem

North Korea: On the face of it, it would seem to be a perfect example of the absence of democracy and famine

... Close scrutiny: picture is murkier

... Information not a problem; early 1990s ... asked for help from SK and Japan, as well as China; 1992 "Let's Eat Two Meals"

But what *the free people did with the information*: 1991 cessation of food aid: 1993 Chinese demanding cash payment for food imports: South Korea refused to help

Criminal on the part of North Korean regime, **callous** on the part of others

... In fact, GLF ... information was not the issue: 1958, 1959: 1961: (political immobilism caused by the political struggle with Peng Dehuai)

... Adversarial politics or information—sins of that regime is fifty years old, always able to protect the entitlement regime ... but the famine was a recent problem.

... Kim Il Sung's death

... **Developmental disaster that needs to be examined very closely studies ... how the whole economy imploded, and along with it, agriculture**

(2) Re-examine Food Availability Decline Thesis (FAD) as the result of calamities:

... Total food availability vs. access

... India and China—reverse images:

... Critically important to see how natural calamities conspire with social calamities

... Raymond Williams: “Nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.”

... Reverse is true ... history, extraordinary amount of nature

... Work through the complex interaction ...

... Mike Davis ... World climate system and world economy—late 1870s (India, Ceylon, north China, southern Java and Borneo, the Visayas, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Angola, South Africa, northeast Brazil)

[Slide 2: El Nino]

North Korea:

... 1995, 1996 “worst floods in a century” The DPRK Bureau of Hydro Meteorological Service

... Epic floods followed by “worst drought in decades,” wiping out 70 percent of its vital maize crop (FAO/WFP Mission Report of July 1997)

[Slide 3: Damaged Agricultural Land]

[Slide 4: 1997 Monthly Rainfall]

[Slide 5: Satellite picture of draught]

... After three catastrophic years of floods and droughts, 1998-1999 had relatively ordinary droughts, then again in 2000 all hell broke loose.

... Drought in 2000, which also affected China, a number of other countries in central and south Asia, and the Middle East ... but the impact is greatest on North Korea since it can produce food only one season, June to October. FAO/WFP representatives reported empty reservoirs, with overall water situation extremely poor.

... Following this drought, North Korea had the "coldest winter" in decades, DPRK was again hit by a prolonged severe drought in the spring of 2001, ravaging winter/spring wheat, barley and potato crops.

(FAO/WFP Mission Report of July 2001)

... Something is wrong here.

... North Korea was in the eye of the global ecological disaster, known as ENSO, at least from 1997 on.

... El Nino, "the weak counter-current that slightly raises sea temperatures off the coast of Ecuador and Peru every year near Christmas (hence El Nino, the Christ child).

... ENSO: "the active ocean component of a vast, Pacific Basin-wide oscillation in air mass and ocean temperature," and particularly, the warm phase of ENSO

... This ENSO warm extreme is what is associated with drought in much of the monsoon tropics and northern China. "ENSO, a clunky acronym, is the name of the Great White Whale, the "secret of the monsoons" itself."

... Meteorology: the record of it goes back to 1728.

.... In the nearly three hundred of this recorded history, there were three truly biggies: 1876---India, China, Brazil

...1982

...1997-1998: Depth of the North Korean holocaust, marks the year that recorded the "worst drought in decades."

... The 1997-1998 ENSO had a long reach, stretching from Syria to Mongolia to China and also to Southeast Asia, devastating several developing economies that were mostly hapless against the most unusual climatic abnormalities.

.... A particularly severe winter in Tibet wiped out an estimated 20 percent of all livestock. In Mongolia it produced a summer drought that left the animals unable to fatten for winter, and eventually killed

some 3 million livestock. In Indonesia, an extended El Nino-associated drought aided the devastating fire that ripped through its tinder-dry forests, causing an estimated forest damage of 17,600 square miles. In Tajikistan, famine threatened its six million people, in what was deemed to be a worst drought in a half-century.

... ENSO played havoc in 1997 in North Korea, following the floods in 1995-1996 ... Not much written on it, except I did read a report done by **US Army Topographical Engineering Center**:

(By the way: military and weather---US military superiority based largely on **electronic umbrella** backed up with a **ground presence of mobile infantry and mechanized heavy weapons**---both advantages, especially the firepower advantage, can be wiped out in a 24-hour period that produces 20-31 inch rain fall---North Korea the only country with a truly systematic effort to eradicate any external knowledge of weather or climate data ... importance of weather data as a strategic weapon)

.... Northern China ... extensive record linking it to ENSO

... In fact, GLF: in fact, el nino of 1957-1959 very strong, and produced not only the GLF but nearly a million refugees in Brazil .

... Chinese meteorologists have characterized the drought, which affected one-third of the nation's cultivated acreage, as the most extreme of the twentieth century. For the first time in human memory, people could actually walk across the Yellow River."

... North Korea tried so hard to escape the world market system, but ended up getting enmeshed smack in the middle of the world ecological disaster.

[Slide 6: Estimates of Grain Production]

(3) Developmental Context:

Sen: ... at the end of the hunger spectrum ... qualitatively the same ... nip it through operation of private stimulated by cash support to famine victims...

... Cataclysmic breakdown vs. Extreme of poverty ... draw different conclusions

... Temporary disaster ... Remedy of restoring the entitlement set through employment in public works; classic British remedy for India, that is 2 centuries old

... System breakdown: what do I mean by this?

[Slide 7: North Korea at Night]

... Many economists, like Nick Noland, have said famine caused by the lack of incentive system

... True 40 years ago as it is now, was in 1995.

... Moored to land and home, tools; between the collectivization and 1988, output increased two-folds.

... Peculiarity: Energy regime, industrial and agricultural regime: probably one of the most energy dependent agricultures in Asia:

Imploded when the Soviet Union collapsed, Trade shock in 1991, all fell apart when concessionary energy imports came to a creaking halt: China

[Slide 8: Imports USSR]

[Slide 9: Oil Imports to North Korea]

--fertilizer

[Slide 10: Fertilizer use, comparison]

... In 1990: as much as S Korea, much more than PRC and Vietnam

[Slide 11: Drop in Fertilizer consumption, 1989-2004]

--tractors

[Slide 12: Tractor application---drops precipitously through the early 1990]

--irrigation

[Slide 13: Irrigation pumping demand ... 1/4 of one line generating capacity]

[Slide 14 and 15: pride of socialism---out of the barren land, steep terraced hills]

[Slide 16: Soil Erosion]

... Irrigation/ no energy/ ecological degradation—virgin land scheme--
Drought Follows the Plough

... Coal mines/ hydroelectric power

... Consumption of biomass ... chopping down trees

[Slide 17: Denuded Mountains]

... Rehabilitation of rural energy regime

... Cheaper: couple million tons of grains; three, four millions a year

[Slide 18: Food Imports and Aid]

... Military application

... Why bother? Never a communist country that collapsed as the result
of famine; Haile Selassie, Ethiopia

(4) Social Consequences of famine:

... Economists have little to say, other than the obvious: human capital

... Political scientists don't do any better ... Famine and collective
action: Minnesota study; or a study of Vietnam, centering on the
famine of 1944-1945

... Cornelius Walford once remarked that in Britain famines ... the
English Poor Law, the Corn Laws ... Famine Code of 1880

...GLF; Vietnam; Mongolia ... often led to massive policy reversal

... GLF: elaborate—Dali Yang's argument: household-orientation
starting with the shock of the GLF; research in some areas also
reporting a return to household centered farming far earlier than 1978
(Kate Xiao Zhou, Lynn White, and David Zweig)

... North Korea: For better or worse, NK is in transition.

... Accepting expansion of farmers markets

... Over 300 of these markets trading in a wide range on goods and
services, and these markets are now providing 70-80% of the

consumption of the urban population No longer called farmer's market—simply market

[Slide 19: Market in Pyongyang]

... Not planned; public distribution system had broken down the government threw its hands, and prices are now not set by the government

... Perestroika ... Gorbachev

... Combining two types of socialist reforms:

(1) Reminiscent of the not very successful Kosygin reforms in the 1960s, or the **first-generation Soviet type reform**, focusing on better incentives within the old system rather than systemic changes, like agricultural procurement prices that get boosted to make it more attractive to sell grain to the state. Parallel private trade in foodstuffs is permitted."

(2) North Koreans **immediately** moved to **second-generation reforms**, involving elements of market socialism, and the rise of the private markets. Attempts have been made to adjust prices and wages to markets. State enterprises have been given foreign trade rights, further enhancing the rights of their managers.

Examining the two huge devaluations in August 2002 and October 2003, to catch up with the black exchange rate, leading to wild price increases of up to 60,000 percent

Anders Ashlund ... the Soviet economic crisis around 1990 ... when Mikhail Gorbachev's regime entered its death throes."

Suggests not only massive distortions but an absence of macroeconomic thinking, also characteristic of the Soviet Union.

... No turning back

Conclusion:

Summing up: Chinese had a pithy way of pondering about famine: Bad climate? Bad system?

Bad system, clearly: but climate doesn't help, nor does bad economic policy.

When you tote these up, you end up with the situation **R. H. Tawney** once described for the Chinese peasants; ... ripple in the water ... even a slight change in total food supply ... drowns

(1) Unfortunately, the Sen argument tends to make people think that you can only solve famine through democracy—through some kind of transition away from totalitarian dictatorship

Sen does not advocate “regime change,” but many powerful people do—almost everyone outside NK would like to see the regime fall, or democratize

But it would be wrong to think that more pressure from outside would do good, because it suggests to NK leaders the ultimate catastrophe: losing their state

As North Korea threatens to make good on its claim to possess a nuclear arsenal by testing the bomb, the world finds itself playing with an extraordinarily short hand, such that one option, favored by Washington, is to sequester this already sequestered nation, and to sanction this nation already suffering from terrible shortages of food and fuel—all in the hope of forcing the North Koreans . . . to do what? They have been pressured by the greatest power in the world for 60 years—what good will more pressure do?

The US will get nowhere trying to achieve change through sanction and embargo; the regime will just pass on the cost to the Korean people, as it showed it could do in the late 1990s

I have argued that there was a curious silver-lining in the famine catastrophe: Catastrophe produced & pushed reform

Good deal of thinking about how to shepherd the process of transition, begun with the famine.