Learning from the past?

British international famine relief in comparative perspective, 1873-1879

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What can a historical perspective bring to understandings of global food security?

1. **Contextualising** the current global food crisis

2. **Holistic analysis** of humans’ relationships to different elements of food systems
   
   a. Understanding complex problems in ecological, economic, social, cultural, nutritional, psychological, racial, gendered, and scientific terms, etc.
Aim + Argument

● **Aim:** Using a *comparative* approach to emphasise the role of contingency in approaching humanitarianism and food security
  ○ **CLUSTER I, 1873-1875:**
    ■ Bengal (1873-1874)
    ■ Asia Minor (1873-1875)
  ○ **CLUSTER II, 1876-79 (El-Niño Southern Oscillation [ENSO]):**
    ■ Madras (1876-1878)
    ■ Shanxi (‘The Incredible Famine’) (1876-1879)

● **Perceptions of famine causation influence famine relief methods**
1. Context of the 1870s famines

Map key, circa 1870s:
- Ottoman Empire
- India
- Qing China
Major causes of peasant immiseration in India, China, and the Ottoman Empire:

- Aggressive Anglo-European imperial expansion
- Oppressive land taxes
- Exploitation of natural resources (e.g. deforestation, mining, canal building)
- Deficient transport and communications
- Coercive market integration
- Forced shift from subsistence farming to cash crop agriculture
- Agricultural debt spirals
- Dissolution of communal aid structures in favour of centralised state relief

1. Context of the 1870s famines (2)
2. Understandings of Famine’s Causes

- **1870s**: no single way of thinking about famine
  - Culturally specific and inflected by particular world views and expertise
- **BUT, in broad terms, famine was understood as in terms of a lack of ‘civilisation’**
  - = racist + paternalistic
    - So-called ‘cultural backwardness’
    - Hunger as discipline
    - Lack of ‘material progress’, e.g. market integration and infrastructure
3. Prescribing Famine Relief: India

- Famine relief responded to famines in terms of remedying ‘a lack of civilisation’
  - Technological and market infrastructure
  - Social reform and discipline
  - Missionary relief encouraging religious conversion

- **BENGAL = exceptional:** large-scale state intervention
  - State-run famine relief works on public utilities; gratuitous grain dole; state importation of grain; agricultural loans

- **MADRAS = mass mortality** due to state non-intervention and emphasis on maximum economy
  - Temple Ration: reduction of daily relief ration from 2500 calories to 1627 calories (both on hard manual labour)
4. Prescribing Famine Relief: Ottoman + Qing Empires

- Famine relief responded to famines in terms of remedying ‘a lack of civilisation’
- Protestant missionaries (and expatriates) distributed relief, due to Britain’s lack of jurisdiction
  - Could not set up famine relief works
  - Relied on cash/grain doles + social services
  - Criticism of Ottoman + Qing state famine relief
Conclusions

☑ Our subjective understandings of famine’s causes directly influence our responses to it

☑ Famine relief, no matter how well-intended, always occurs in a historical context of unequal power relations

☑ Food insecurity cannot be confined within disciplinary boundaries

☑ Complex problems require similarly complex and interdisciplinary responses
THANK YOU!
Questions welcome