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Ayesha Mukherjee, editor. *A Cultural History of Famine: Food Security and the Environment in India and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 227pp.

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Ancient Rome, dawn of the republican age. A group of emaciated citizens, enraged and desperate from hunger, heads towards the Capitol. Violent plans take shape. Nevertheless, just then, the starving citizens meet Senator Menenius Agrippa, who manages to coax and placate them with ambiguous words, exonerating the Roman authorities of all responsibility, and laying the blame for the famine not on the politics of the Senate, but on the unfathomable and inclement (gods-made) climatic conditions:

For your wants,  
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well  
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them  
Against the Roman state (Shakespeare 215)

Senator Agrippa tempts the rioters, with a story that he defines as a bit stale: an apologue of the relationship between the stomach and other parts of the body. If the confrontation had actually taken place in ancient Rome, the story would probably have seemed quite original. However, due to the circumstances in which this text was staged for the first time, it was undoubtedly true that the public had already heard it many times, as the author (William Shakespeare) ironically reported. In fact, the passage is taken from *Coriolanus*, one of the Shakespearean Roman tragedies, written when the Midland Risings, caused by the enclosures and scarcity of 1607, had recently quelled. This typical connection between ideology and climatically extreme events is discussed in one of the essays presented in this complex and interdisciplinary collection: Julie Hudson (“Are we performing dearth or is dearth performing us?”, pp. 185-198) analyzes the works of Shakespeare that deal with the theme of famine (in particular *Coriolanus*), and the way in which these works were represented in the subsequent theatrical history. The theme of hunger in Shakespeare is explored by Hudson in ecocritical terms, conveying the idea that famine and dearth are epiphanic moments, moments which make it dramatically clear that the environment is internal to human beings and shapes everything they do.

This approach is recurrent in this collection of essays, edited by Ayesha Mukherjee. The subject here is food security in England and India, with a special, but not exclusive, focus on the period between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The literary sources examined in the book range from Shakespeare's plays that describe situations of

famine to the analysis of books written by and for mid-twentieth-century British farmers, up to the comparative analysis of Bengali novels on the theme of famine. Alongside these analyses, we also find interesting essays on environmental history and economic history, also referring to both the English and Indian contexts. The volume is characterized by frequent internal references (explicit and implicit) between one essay and another. This aspect of the book sometimes gives the impression of reading a collection of essays by a single author with an unusually extensive and diversified background, and not a compilation of essays by several authors belonging to different specialist areas.

In many contexts, a book on the topic of food security, written from such an openly historical-humanistic perspective, can be considered surprising. It can be expected that a controversial issue such as political ecology (food security) will be pertinent to an ecological scientific approach, or perhaps to a sociological or purely economic one. However, the point of many of the analyses presented in this collection is that the processes that make us define a given situation as famine, or dearth, as well as the processes that determine the emergence of subsistence crises, are both extremely complex cultural phenomena. Surely, they often have a close relationship with unusual climatic events (of the kind evoked by Agrippa while trying to appease his Shakespearean crowd). Nevertheless, climate is usually not sufficient to explain the rise and the worsening of the subsistence crises that can lead to severe conditions of famine, and to millions of deaths (such as happened in Bengal starting in 1787). Most often, climatic reasons, if considered on their own, can serve no more than as excellent alibis. They can hide the political and social reasons, which caused similar climatic events to have a highly diversified impact in adjacent territories, but with different socio-political outcomes.

A further surprising aspect of this collection of essays is the subject's peculiar carving: why India and England together? The eerie connection between periods of scarcity and famine in these two distant countries is precisely one of the themes analyzed from several perspectives in some of these essays. Mukherjee had already considered the late-Elizabethan representation of dearth and hunger in the English context, as well as the socio-economic reasons that underpin them, in her book *Penury into Plenty: Dearth and the Making of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (2014). However, in *Cultural History of Famine* England and India are linked from the very beginning. In the first pages of her introduction, Mukherjee provides a table that accurately illustrates the repeated and troubling parallels of the subsistence crises in the two countries, at the beginning of the modern age. Even more disturbing is the sudden interruption of the series in England in the mid-eighteenth century. Disturbing, if we consider that, in the same years, the series continued without significant changes in India, up to the devastating Bengal famine of 1787–1793.

The temptation to justify the first part of this series with a climatic explanation is strong. This theory experienced a period of great popularity a few years ago, after the publication of Parker's seminal book, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe*

*in the Seventeenth Century* (2013) on the global effects of climate change and Little Ice Age (LIA) on seventeenth-century politics. Parker's theses are explicitly discussed in some essays in this book, and they are not entirely rejected. Damodaran, Hamilton and Allan, the authors of the essay "Climate Signals, environment and livelihoods in the long seventeenth-century India" (pp. 52-70), after careful analysis, only ask for supplemental investigation, a greater and more significant collection of data, especially for the eastern part of the thesis. They only contend that, in the current state of research, the climatic theory does not function as an adequate explanatory tool to understand the developments of Indian history in the period in question. In fact, at that time in India there were no relevant political upheavals, in correspondence to the negative peaks of the LIA or at least the levels of conflict were not too different from what is usual in that area.

The impression one gets from reading these analyses is that the theories which provide climatic causes to explain Indian famines are contested also for political reasons. In Shakespeare's Rome, as in the country administered by the East India Company, or in the England of the Stuarts, blaming the climate is one way of exempting rulers from their responsibilities. These responsibilities usually began long before the crisis, for example with the interruption or sabotage of the networks of mutual aid, at a local and district level, which had often allowed the inhabitants —both in England and in India—to cope with subsistence crises. In all these cases, supply and demand do not reconcile because, in adverse climatic situations, the structures of economic and social privilege distinctly emerge. The problem is less a question of supply than entitlement (Amartya Sen's theory of entitlement is a frequent reference in many essays of this anthology): "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many possible causes" (Sen 1).

Ultimately, the fact that the subsistence crises ceased altogether in eighteenth-century imperial and industrial England while continuing at the same time in India, is better explained by the colonial asymmetry between the two countries than by a sudden improvement in the British weather.

## Works cited

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