

Secondly, how to reconstruct the global Eric Hobsbawm in a wider sense – an author with the singular ability to become a point of reference not only for general readers, but also for several generations of historians, not least in the countries of the Global South.³ Twenty years after the “global turn”, it has a strange effect of unintended centredness to see Hobsbawm’s major books come alive through the contemporary reviews of others, yet almost entirely by anglophone authors, while the numerous translations are duly mentioned, but only as a list. To see Hobsbawm’s “Life in History” in full, a second biography might therefore be needed, one that focuses on the global figure in all its facets of contacts, impacts, and appropriations. Such an enterprise can probably only be done collectively – and one can only hope that it will be as thoughtful and elegant as Evans’s first foray.

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doi:10.1017/S0020859020000619

An Economic History of Famine Resilience. Ed. by Jessica Dijkman and Bas van Leeuwen. [Routledge Explorations in Economic History, 84.] Routledge, New York 2020. xi, 276 pp. Ill. Maps. £120.00. (E-book: £44.99).

This highly interesting volume originated in a workshop organized in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in November 2016. The editors’ selection follows a global approach in a very long-run perspective. The result is an impressive fresco of the socioeconomic and institutional practices promoted in different places and times to cope with famine, which endeavours to lay bare the reasons for the success or failure of such practices in different cases. What remains less clear are the case-selection criteria and whether they can be considered strictly comparable.

In their exhaustive introduction (pp. 1–13), Jessica Dijkman and Bas van Leeuwen outline the central issue, the theories and concepts, the different actors, and some general patterns that form the basis of this book, which they say discusses the “societal resilience to food crises and famines: the responses and strategies at the societal level that effectively helped individuals and groups to cope with drops in food supply, in various parts of the world over the past two millennia” (p. 1). Famine is considered here as the combined outcome of human and natural factors, with a central role being played by institutions in promoting the distribution of food. This volume therefore focuses particularly on “the three main coordination mechanisms that, in any society, allow people to allocate or share resources: the state, the market, and civil society” (p. 2), and on how they react to food crises, by promoting social (or, better, famine) resilience. In the last part of the introduction, through the great heterogeneity of forms and practices of famine resilience described in the various chapters, the

3. For an essay on the “global Hobsbawm”, see Emile Chabal, “The Voice of Hobsbawm: How the Marxist Ideas of a British Historian Ended up on the Bookshelves of Indian Civil Servants and Brazilian Housewives”, Aeon, available at: <https://aeon.co/essays/how-eric-hobsbawm-helped-shape-the-global-marxist-imagination>; last accessed 6 September 2020.

editors synthesize the similarities and the wider patterns observable in this volume. They identify four main recurrent elements: (1) the changing intensity and character of famines; (2) the changing interaction of the contributions of state, market, and civil society; (3) the better contextualization and definition of the concept of societal resilience; and (4) the discovery of the importance of the three coordinating mechanisms (of market, state, and civil society) instead of the agency of individuals and households in promoting societal resilience.

The book is divided into three parts and thirteen chapters, including the introduction. The first part is devoted to the premodern world and is introduced by Bas van Leeuwen and Jieli Li's essay "Response to famines in core regions of antiquity compared" (pp. 17–32). In this chapter, four ancient societies (Han China, the Seleucid Empire, the Roman Empire, and the pre-classical Maya civilization) are considered by applying the above methodology to some regions with a high incidence of nature-caused famines and a general lack of social coordination mechanisms. The Roman Empire is also examined in the third chapter, by Luuk de Ligt, titled "Political, social and economic determinants of responses to food crises in the early Roman Empire" (pp. 33–51). The author focuses on the importance of institutional and free market forces in resolving urban food crises and particularly on the capability of grain merchants and local governments to cope with crisis, in the context of the strong direction of the central Roman government. The fourth chapter, written by Semih Çelik, leads the reader to the early modern (and modern) Near East, focusing particularly on "Coping with famines in Ottoman Anatolia (1650–1850)" (pp. 52–73). The protagonists of this chapter are the local communities; specifically, it considers the role of migration in favouring the resilience of local society. The fifth chapter, "Inca responses to environmental hazards in the capital region and provinces", by R. Alan Covey, returns us to pre-Columbian America (pp. 74–92). The author underlines the peculiar Inca state intervention in preventive works to limit environmental hazards both in the capital and in the other provinces, thanks to the power of the Inca elite and the "political" use of their religious ideology. The first part ends with the sixth chapter, by Jessica Dijkman, titled "Feeding the hungry: Poor relief and famine in northwestern Europe, 1500–1700" (pp. 93–111). The author focuses on some typical institutions for poor relief widespread in southern England, the Low Countries, and northwestern France. They were organized at the level of parish, village, or town and supervised by the local authorities in order to manage a series of "welfare" activities, including alleviating the consequences of food shortage. Beyond their geographical proximity and their common medieval roots, this chapter shows a certain heterogeneity in these three regions, which then developed different trajectories during the early modern period.

The second part of the book deals with the modern world and opens with an essay by Esther Beeckaert and Eric Vanhaute entitled "Whose famine? Regional differences in vulnerability and resilience during the 1840s potato famine in Belgium" (pp. 115–141). This chapter aims "to map and explain the regional variations of the impact of the 1840s food crisis in Belgium" (p. 115), which were related to the different internal coping mechanisms and redistribution techniques and the characteristics of the different peasant societies in the various parts of the country. In the eighth chapter, Ulbe Bosma focuses on the Far East, specifically on "The integration of food markets and increasing government intervention in Indonesia: 1815–1980s" (pp. 142–161). The author reconstructs how colonial and post-colonial governments coped with restricted access to food and volatile food prices in relation to the role played by the market and the local communities. The ninth chapter, "Famine, relief and rhetoric of welfare in colonial North India", by Sanjay Sharma, is also devoted to Asia and colonial governments (pp. 162–181). The author focuses on how "colonial famine relief policies were grounded in narratives of critiques of the indigenous practices of

charity” (p. 163) and on the process of complex interaction between indigenous charity and British officials, by analysing the case of the region known today as Uttar Pradesh. Stephen G. Wheatcroft’s essay, “Societal responses to food shortages and famine in Russia and China” (pp. 182–202), deals with two regions – both characterized by greater food problems in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which responded very well to famines prior to the 1850s in China and 1917 in Russia. In contrast, the concern on the part of post-revolutionary governments with urban and military consumers created serious problems for the peasant producer and rural societies. The second part concludes with the eleventh chapter, by Stephen Devereux, “Preventable famines: Response and coordination failures in twenty-first-century famines” (pp. 203–223). The author focuses on the four mass mortality famines that occurred in Ethiopia (1999–2000), Malawi (2001–2002), Niger (2005), and Somalia (2011) during the twenty-first century and on the predictable character of these food shortages, in relation to the historical context, and on the market, state, and civil society responses of each country analysed.

The third and final part looks at long-run perspectives. Meimei Wang, Piotr Koryś, and Maciej Tyimiński’s essay is titled “Centralized vs. decentralized: Dealing with famines in China and Poland (a long-term analysis)” (pp. 227–247). Their aim is to analyse the long-term disaster relief system during the economic and political change that occurred in these two countries, particularly considering the impact of centralized or decentralized regimes. The book concludes with Leo Lucassen’s contribution, “The final straw that broke the camel’s back: Famine and migration, a global exploration” (pp. 248–269), which, starting from the example of the Irish Famine of the nineteenth century, considers the dual relationship between food shortages and migration by enlarging his analysis in space and time and considering the differences and connections between urban and rural societies.

The book is well-organized and, in general, each chapter addresses a key issue with convincing arguments. Regrettably, there are certain aspects this book does not include: the medieval period is practically forgotten, the early modern period is underrepresented, central and Mediterranean Europe are almost completely absent post-Antiquity, and only brief attention is paid to Africa and the Americas. Equally, in some cases, the application of similar (present-day) concepts to such distant and heterogeneous societies without proper contextualization could prove a weakness. Nonetheless, these comments do not diminish the relevance and originality of this volume. This is a thought-provoking book, which greatly improves our knowledge on the economic history of famine resilience by providing many case studies from around the world, from different periods, each seeking to respond to a common theoretical framework.

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doi:10.1017/S0020859020000620