



The Food Queue (1918)
by C. R. W. Nevinson
depicts food rationing in
First World War Britain.

Starvation: crime and punishment

Hunger: A Modern History

by James Vernon

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Michael Sargent

For any nation, eliminating the risk of serious malnutrition or starvation is a mark of developmental maturity. Getting there requires a combination of factors: acute scientific and political awareness, appropriate institutions and a benign economic situation. James Vernon charts progress towards this goal in Britain, between the 'hungry forties' (1840s) and the emergence of its welfare state a century later.

Britain was the first country to industrialize, moving towards dependence on imported food, truly representative government and proficient public services. Other European countries had similar trajectories but took longer as they were gripped by more rural poverty and industrialized less aggressively. The land-rich United States and Australia had low population densities and swallowed up their 'huddled masses' efficiently. Yet even the United States could not entirely avoid malnutrition; in the 1900s, niacin deficiency (pellagra) was extremely common in the South.

Vernon's story begins in an era of unprecedented economic development and extraordinary pressure on society's poorest strata. The oracle of the age, Thomas Malthus, saw hunger as God-given discipline for the profligate and the reproductively overenthusiastic. His

thinking underpinned the New Poor Law of 1834, a measure designed to make poverty feel like a crime, that involved incarcerating paupers in the workhouses immortalized in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Deeply critical, *The Times* newspaper tried to stir polite society's conscience with lurid reports of the fate of victims of the 'Starvation Act', malthusianism and the Corn Laws (that banned cheap imports of grain in years of scarcity to protect the interests of wealthy landowners).

Devastating famine in Ireland brought by the potato blight in 1845–47 provoked neither sympathy nor much governmental assistance for these British subjects. To Charles Trevelyan (a former pupil of Malthus), with some responsibility for dealing with the crisis, it was "an act of providence"; "a sharp and effectual remedy" for the over-population considered an obstacle to land reform. Later in the century, the intense distress conveyed by photographs and reports of Indian famines made the moralizing face of malthusianism seem shameful and the Imperial management look incompetent.

After the turn of the century, research on the scientific basis of nutrition gained momentum and started to shape governmental thinking. Seeborn Rowntree's dietary survey of 1904 showed that the daily calorie intake of 30% of the population of York was less than the minimum required for a healthy life. In the British army, two-thirds of volunteers for service in the Boer War failed to meet physical-fitness requirements because they were undernour-

ished. During the First World War, scientists were recruited to devise diets for soldiers and civilians and to implement food rationing.

Knowledge of the health benefits of vitamins and minerals, gained in the 1920s, raised the question of who should guide the public towards better dietary habits. The problem was severe: surveys in the 1930s revealed some malnutrition in half of the British population, not only the poor. With evidence accumulating that infant mortality, stunting of growth, susceptibility to chronic disease and work-time lost through sickness or lassitude could all have nutritional causes, public policy had to take new directions. One of the most important schemes introduced nutritionally sound meals in school. More problematic was the attitude of the public, often deaf to official advice yet responsive to an advertising industry whose influence was not always good.

Starvation emerged as a potent political weapon in the twentieth century. Hunger strikes by suffragettes, the Irish and Indian nationalists embarrassed policy-makers in ways that would have cut no ice with early nineteenth-century governments. Hunger marches before the First World War and in the 1930s, staged as protests over unemployment and the dole, had consequences that emerged only after 1945. They symbolized a great wrong inflicted on the working classes that would be put right only by a welfare scheme that secured minimum living standards.

Hunger is a thought-provoking book. Sharply

EXHIBITION

Ancient orders of nature

Martin Kemp

The blind giant, Orion, his left arm extended in a precautionary manner, proceeds along a road in a sumptuous landscape. He is guided by his companion, Cedalion, who stands on his shoulders and directs him towards the rising Sun, prescribed as a cure for his sightless condition.

Orion had been blinded in Chios by the father of Princess Merope, whom he had vilely attempted to rape. The goddess Diana coolly observes Orion's uncertain progress from the cluster of clouds that still veil the giant's head from the restorative Sun. It was Diana who later translated the giant into the starry constellation, after Orion had unwisely directed his rapacious intentions towards her.

Even if the subject of the blind Orion was very rare, we are familiar enough with this kind of picture from the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The *Landscape with Blind Orion Searching for the Sun* (pictured) was painted in 1658 by Nicolas Poussin, the French artist resident in Rome during the last years of his life.

Like a number of paintings on ancient themes, it was inspired by an account of a lost work by an ancient author. Lucian, in *The Hall*, describes a sequence of wall paintings: "The next picture deals with the ancient story of Orion. He is blind, and on his shoulder carries Cedalion, who directs the sightless eyes towards the East. The rising Sun heals his infirmity."

Beyond the highly controlled naturalism, there is little to suggest that either the subject or the artist might be engaged with the scientific culture of the time. However, as Ernst Gombrich showed in 1994,

Poussin's most direct literary source was a reference book on classical mythology that aspired to demonstrate how "all the doctrines of Natural and Moral Philosophy were contained in the fables of the ancients". It was published in 1551 in *Mythologiae* by Natalis Comes (Natale Conti), who went to acrobatic lengths to show how ancient myths embodied modern discoveries in the guise of allegory.

Poussin, as the supreme "philosophical painter" of his (or virtually any other) generation was naturally drawn to a source that promised to bind the wisdom of his revered 'ancients' to the new sciences. Poussin, who moved in high intellectual circles in Rome, insisted on the rational basis of art as visual knowledge.

He defined the proper role of

painting as a form of rational scrutiny, distinct from mere seeing and passive imitation. It was to reveal in form and content the underlying order of the created world and the integral position of humans in the divine system of nature. The landscape is based on the wonderfully fresh studies that Poussin made directly from nature, but the landscape's naturalism is reshaped in terms of what he called "the order and the mode and the species of things".

But what of the specific interpretation of the Orion myth provided by Conti? In summary, Conti's horribly tangled 'scientific' reading runs as follows. Improbably born of the triple copulation of Jupiter, Neptune and Apollo with the hide of oxen, Orion was accordingly composed of air, water and fire, as expressed as wind, rain and thunder. Orion's journey to Chios, his rape of — in Conti's version — Aerope (air) and blinding signify the diffusion

of his watery powers in the form of vapours, which rise impotently into the upper atmosphere. The ascending vapours are gathered by the cold power of the Moon (Diana) to be cast Earthwards as rainstorms. Conti concludes the story represents the "cyclical and mutual generation and destruction of the elements".

Conti's musings have long been abandoned. Poussin's painting, on the other hand, continues to breathe a timeless sense of the inherent grandeur of nature stirring with inner life and cyclical renewal. Like Cedalion, Poussin saw himself standing on the shoulders of both the giants of antiquity and of his own time, to see further into the truths of the created world. ■

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***Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions* runs 12 February–11 May at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.**



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, FLETCHER FUND, 1924 (24.45.1)

focused and tightly argued, it excludes a few peripheral topics. One wonders why Vernon chose not to explore the evolution of British diets in Victorian times. Sugar-sweetened tea, bread-and-jam and "sugar butties" were adaptations by the poor to industrial employment that alleviated hunger cheaply but also created malnutrition. More curious is the omission of the improvement in stature and life expectancy that started with the repeal of the Corn Laws. The importance of journalism in raising consciousness of hunger as a social problem is discussed, but less emphasis placed on writers such as Dick-

ens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Henry Mayhew. The attitude of the Church is also neglected.

Vernon's story ends in the 1940s when many newly independent nations took responsibility for huge populations. Destitute on a scale never seen in Europe, they faced an accelerated birth rate if the food supply improved. Severe famines have occurred and have been blamed on poor economic management and distribution rather than Malthus' prophecy of moral punishment. Malnutrition is a more insidious problem. In the developing world, vast numbers of people are deficient in vitamins and micro-

nutrients because the range and volume of their food intake is minimal. Consequences include stunted growth of children, low birth weight, decreased immunity to infection and damaged eyesight. Although appropriate welfare schemes can be devised, the solution may lie ultimately in increased economic prosperity. There is little doubt that when incomes improve, the quality of food intake improves. ■

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