



OXFORD JOURNALS  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation by Amartya Sen

Review by: Stein Ringen

Source: *European Sociological Review*, May, 1985, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May, 1985), pp. 94-96

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/522474>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *European Sociological Review*

JSTOR

corrective to the notion that demographers may always be relied upon by government to give adequate forecasts on which policy may be based.

Although in the present reviewer's opinion McIntosh perhaps tends to underplay the profound difference between France on the one hand and Sweden and West Germany on the other, in terms of both popular and governmental sympathies for a more active pronatalism, the book does on the whole deal in an even-handed and dispassionate way with the issues raised. One would certainly echo the general conclusion that 'the sense of

urgency over population decline is still far from acute in the liberal democracies of Western Europe', and link it very clearly to the fact that governmental policies in the 1970s and 1980s have, perhaps necessarily, been mesmerized by economic constraints. Whether the widespread ignorance about demographic trends documented in this book and a general reluctance to involve the state too closely in family formation will intensify economic problems remains a largely open question.

P. E. Ogden  
Queen Mary College,  
University of London, U.K.

**Amartya Sen: Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. 257 pp.

In 'the great Bengal famine' in 1943, the death toll was 1.5 million people or more. In the Ethiopian famine of 1972–74, between 50 000 and 200 000 people died. In the Sahel area famine of 1968–73, there were perhaps 100 000 dead in the peak year of 1973. In the Bangladesh famine of 1974, as many as 100 000 persons may have died of starvation and malnutrition in 2–3 months. Amartya Sen has analysed these famines in order to understand what causes the phenomenon of famine, a task of truly monumental importance in a world of hunger, has been able to report findings of the utmost practical and political importance and to do this in a way which at the same time makes significant contributions to social theory.

The remarkable conclusion of the investigation of these famines is that *food availability decline* is not a very important factor in explaining how famine occurs. In the Ethiopian case, there was a food availability collapse in one of the famine areas but not in the other; and in the Sahel famine food consumption per head did go down but not enough to entirely explain the famine. In Bengal in 1943 and Bangladesh in 1974, there were famines in spite of sufficient food being available. The conventional contemporary theory of hunger and extreme hunger is that it is caused by insufficient food availability. The first achievement of this book is the rejection of a theory which is both generally accepted and on appearance perfectly obvious. Famines are not explained by food shortage! The individual, of course, starves because he does not have enough food, but that is not to say that mass starvation is caused by mass food shortage. Not '*having* enough food to eat' is not the same as '*there being* not enough food to eat' (p. 1). Nor is Sen satisfied to say that famines are explained by the distribution of food, which 'is correct enough, though not remarkably helpful. The important question then

would be: what determines distribution of food between different sections of the community?' (p. 7). In the place of conventional explanations of famine, Sen puts an alternative theory based on the concept of *entitlement*, and adds that if this 'appears odd and unusual, this can be because of the hold of the tradition of thinking in terms of what *exists* rather in terms of who can *command* what' (p. 8). The rejection of the traditional theory is perhaps easier to accept if one remembers that there is today enough food available in the world to feed all comfortably, but that our world is still one of widespread hunger. Sen's alternative theory has a good deal to say about this problem.

The entitlement approach goes about as follows: The individual has certain 'ownerships', such as labour power, property, or cash. The environment offers certain 'opportunities', such as jobs or commodities. The individual can exchange some of his 'ownerships' for some of the 'opportunities'. These exchange possibilities are regulated by 'entitlements', i.e. what 'opportunity bundles' the various 'ownership bundles' give a right to. The existence of entitlements is in turn explained by what, for various reasons, is generally *accepted* in the society in question. The reason why I can buy food if I have cash is not that there is food available, but that it is accepted in my society that cash gives me a right to food; I have an entitlement. Sen lists trade-based, production-based, labour-based, and inheritance-based entitlements as examples of typical entitlements in a market economy. One might say that entitlements ought to follow needs, but as is well known, this is not the case. My need for food, e.g. in the form of hunger, does not in itself give me a right to food, no matter how much food is available.

In the light of this theory it is easy to see that food shortage is not the only possible explanation of famines,

i.e. famines are not necessarily explained by looking at 'opportunities' only. Food shortage could only explain a famine if total food supply fell below the total minimum food requirement of the population. If this is not the case, an alternative or additional explanation is needed to account for the distribution of the food which is available. This explanation can be related either directly to 'ownerships'—which brings Sen into a discussion of the concept of poverty—or to 'exchange entitlements', i.e. what the individual can actually acquire for what he owns. Unemployment is an example of an exchange entitlement breaking down: the individual can no longer get what he wants (a job) for what he owns (his labour power). Food shortage may, of course, contribute to famine, but in this analysis entitlement breakdowns come out as a more important factor. The Bengal famine, for example, 'was not the reflection of a remarkable over-all shortage of foodgrains in Bengal' (p. 63) but rather a result of exchange entitlements being disrupted. In spite of more or less stable food supply, prices sky-rocketed because of war time hoarding and other factors, leaving large groups without sufficient purchasing power. The effect of cyclones, flooding and crop disease was not primarily to bring down food supply (including imported food) but to leave workers without jobs or income possibilities.

The phenomenon of famine is here shown to be more complicated than what is often assumed. In order to understand famines, one needs to understand not only the supply of food, but rather 'the *relationship* of people to food' (p. 154). Hunger has to do with *rights* and *power*. The reason the unemployed in, say, Britain do not starve is not primarily that there is food available but that the unemployed are 'guaranteed minimum values of exchange entitlements owing to the social security system' (p. 7). What the hungry masses of the world need is not so much additional food supply; the necessary food is on hand and an additional supply would probably not reach the poor. What they need is *power* which entitles them to a sufficient share in the food which is available.

A second achievement of the book is not only to offer an alternative theory to the one rejected but also to demonstrate that theory matters for practice, in this case in the sense that an inadequate theory of famine may have contributed to inefficient anti-famine policies, e.g. in the case of Bengal. By concentrating on food supply, authorities may easily find themselves unprepared for famines which have other causes and may in their efforts to combat hunger place too much emphasis on supplying food and too little on regulating the distribution of food according to needs. On the international scene it is obvious enough that the habit of focusing on 'whats exists rather than who can command what' allows for much nonsense to be spoken about the

rich nations 'helping' the poor, and makes it possible for the privileged minority to escape facing up to the problem of power and development.

The entitlement approach is a general theory for explaining 'who gets what' based on individual resources, societal opportunities, and mechanisms connecting the two. As is often the case with good theories, it is simple enough—once it has been thought out and formulated. Some of the characteristics of the theory and its application are the following. It contributes to bridge-building between segments of social theory which have usually been dealt with separately, something which makes it an example of the kind of theory many sociologists and economists are presently busy at work trying to develop. Economists want theories of economic behaviour which take into consideration complex and changing environments (e.g. institutions and norms) instead of assuming the environment to be given and constant (free markets); and sociologists want theories which see social action as a function of structural 'determination' and individual choice, e.g. rational behaviour. Or, to put it more generally, within both disciplines on is trying to incorporate individual and structural variables and micro- and macro-perspectives. The entitlement theory explains the phenomenon under investigation (famine) not in terms of structures ('opportunities') or of individual characteristics ('ownerships'), but in terms of *both*, by tying the two analytical levels together with the help of the concept of 'entitlements'. This particular theory is applicable for explaining distributions in general and hence offers possibilities for enriching a field of research which has had a descriptive bias. Furthermore, it does this by bringing the concept of *power* into the explanation of inequality. And this is not all. Sen not only develops an intellectually satisfying theory, something which is important enough in itself, he also applies the theory for analysing an important, concrete and down-to-earth problem. It is through this application that the power of institutional theory is demonstrated. The combination of theoretical sophistication and practical relevance is a third achievement of this book.

In Sen's treatment of poverty, one senses a good deal of impatience with 'the relative concept of poverty', which has become topical in sociological studies, and some of the strange things which have been said about poverty in the name of that theory are simply ridiculous when seen against the background of so disastrous a phenomenon as famine: for example, 'poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder'. The book is a refreshing criticism of a large body of literature which in order to achieve a political 'impact' has relativized the concept of poverty into triviality. Indeed, the very legitimacy of 'the poor' as a category in social analysis

is questioned, mainly because it suggests that 'the poor' constitute a homogeneous group. The 'incidence' (head count) measure is criticized for superficiality because it takes no account of the degree of poverty, and the idea of treating poverty as an aspect of inequality is dismissed, as is the alleged contradiction between 'relative' and 'absolute' poverty: 'there is an irreducible

core of *absolute* deprivation in our idea of poverty, which translates reports of starvation, malnutrition and visible hardship into a diagnosis of poverty without having to ascertain first the relative picture. Thus the approach of relative deprivation supplements rather than supplants the analysis of poverty in terms of absolute dispossession' (p. 17).

Stein Ringen  
*University of Stockholm, Sweden*