
ON FOOD SHORTAGE IN EUROPE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract: *This paper presents a few aspects regarding the history of Europe – one of the most difficult issue from the Middle Ages until now: ensuring food supplies for the population. Food shortage, the deficit engendered by excessive taxing and by natural phenomena have led to famine, to food price increase, to cereal price crises, etc. The analysis presented in this paper points out the human weakness confronted with food shortage, with the deficit engendered by the demographic boom that could not match the high demand for resources.*

Keywords: *famine, food shortage, deficit.*

INTRODUCTION

Famine is a shortage phenomenon, a lack of food that causes people to die.

Deficit is food shortage: its effects are not as devastating as those of famine. European languages use for the term *deficit* a term evoking lack (Latin *carere*) or, depending on the context, a high price (Latin *carus*). The latter etymology refers to the market mechanisms that correspond to speculative deficit mechanisms presented below.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The methodology used in the research is mainly normative and it consists in theoretical principles (the theoretical conception of the studied field), in methods and techniques of data collecting (the informational support necessary to develop a scientific paper), in methods and techniques of data processing (quantitative processing) and in logical processes of analysis and synthesis (building up and systematising theory).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Famine from the Middle Ages to the present: Was Europe Born in the Middle Ages?

Food shortage started in 1270 and it reached a peak with the great famine that devastated North-Western Europe during 1314-1318. Food shortage was reinvented in 1347, another terrible year of the Middle Ages. Food shortage was caused by a poor harvest that made wheat price rise. That was the moment market mechanisms – demand and offer – started to work. Famine was, for certain, no novelty at the end of the 13th century. It haunted Europe during the economic and demographic boom of the 8th century and then fainted. When harvest was poor, starving people died because they were weakened. Glaber provides precious information on the crisis moments mankind had to cross during the so-called Dark Age [1], an age of obscurantism and a world of shadows.

Below is a timeline by Glaber on the famine of the period 1031-1033.

When the crop was invaded by weeds, a muid of cereals reached 60 sous. When there were no more livestock to eat, starving people fed on carcasses or on other “dirty things”. The famine was so severe that people became cannibals: travellers were attacked by starving people who ate their meat. The generalized food shortage and the human despair made people sell human meat on the market. Charity and rich people supplies were not enough to solve the problem.

However, in the 9th century, Charles the Great passed a few laws meant to activate and protect the market from shortages setting prices for the grains and forbidding speculation.

What engenders famine?

Without being a novelty, famine aggravated and it became more common. It persisted in the second half of the 14th century despite the hecatomb caused by pest in 1348. This was treated later from a Malthusian perspective.

Famine has multiple causes. Demographic growth multiplied European population twice or even thrice reaching 70-8- million people. This contrasted with the resources necessary to meet demand. People were also unable to increase cultivated areas and agricultural productivity. Climate accidents also caused severe famine: three years of torrential rains brought suffering in Flanders and England during 1314-1318.

Suffering caused by climate accidents was severe because people were not helped by their leaders. Thus, a Marxist approach advanced a theory of unbalance caused by manorial taxation (taxes collected by the rules of the time) as a supplementary factor of unbalance.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Malthus's theory was not confirmed because resources were enough for everybody. However, nowadays, almost 2 of 7 billion people do not have enough food to get the necessary 2,700 calories for proper feeding: 850 million people get less than 2,200 calories and suffer from constant famine. Moreover, more than 20,000 starving people die every day [5].

We are facing famine again, as in the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages are less remote than we can imagine.

Diary of a wheat trader

- December 1303 – the great costliness, the great famine intensifying in July-August;
- 1305 – the great costliness;
- December 1310 - May 1311 – a very high costliness;
- December 1317 - January 1318 – the great wheat costliness;
- 1322-1323 – costliness in Florence reaching a peak in April-May, and very severe famine in Luca, Pisa and Pistoia;
- 1328-1330 – great costliness in grains, seeds, etc., in both towns and villages; popular uprisings and great grain imports;
- November 1339 - March 1340 – food costliness intensifying at the beginning of spring;
- January 1341 – food costliness;
- 1344 – very great food costliness reaching a peak when people starved to death in towns and villages;
- Winter of 1346-1347 – a new costliness wave aggravating and turning to famine in January 1347 and marking February 1347 with very high costliness;
- Winter of 1351-1352 – generalised bread costliness;
- January-June 1353 – great costliness in towns and villages [2].



Figure 1. Grain market at Orsanmichele, Florence, Italy, during the food shortage

Source: F. Menant, 2013

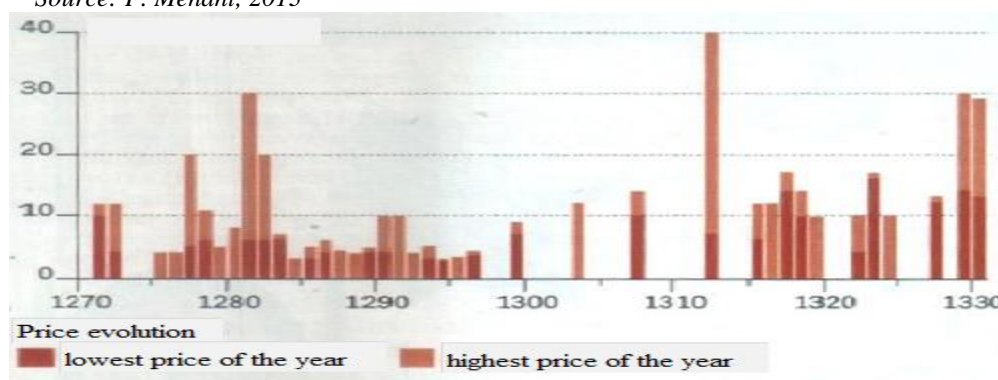


Figure 2. Permanent wheat crisis

Source: P. Savy, 2012

A case study of Parma between 1270 and 1330 emphasises the different types of costliness. There are two distinct processes: on one hand, a micro-crisis, violent but time-limited (1281, 1312 and 1329-1330) and, on the other hand, a generalized wheat price growth after 1330

Medieval economy already operates as a market, putting price in the centre of the crisis

In fact, we could say that part of the European economy operates as a market after the 1th century, a period known as the Late Middle Ages.

The food shortage of the period might have been caused by the ongoing urbanisation that lasted until the end of the 13th century. The country most urbanised, Italy, had 2.5-3 million inhabitants of the 12.5 million European inhabitants, and Tuscany had a larger urban population than other regions. These people needed to purchase foods and particularly bread that needed a mean individual consumption of 225-300 kg of wheat (the grain preferred by the wealthy, and also very expensive). We might say that the increasing demand for grains and the insufficient grain production engendered the rise of the grain price (particularly that of wheat).

In Europe, famine came back during the reign of Louis IV, in the winter of 1693-1694, and caused 1.5 million people to die.

After the 18th century, famine disappears from Europe due to the building of railways and to the rise of trans-Atlantic transport that facilitated quick access to other food markets. However, famine ravaged again Ireland during 1846-1847 and until 1852, when potato disease caused 1 million people to die.

Worldwide, famine in the 20th century caused more deaths than ever. There was huge famine in China, in 1959-1961, when 15-30 million people starved to death. In Russia and Ukraine, about 5-6 million people starved to death during the communist rule. Famine during World War II also made victims all over Europe.

In Romania, World War I brought Galati, on the war line at the time, into severe famine. Active male population was called for weapons, which engendered economic debacle particularly in agriculture: there was nobody but the women, children, and the elderly, and no horses or livestock (requisitioned by the military) to work the land. A Report by the town hall to the Government in Iasi on September 12, 1916 (Arhivele Naționale, Direcția Galați, fond Primăria orașului Galați, dosar 39/1916, fila 13) mentioned the almost complete lack of potato and the small amounts of onion, cabbage, etc. that did not allow sale below maximal prices. To get supplies for the population, delegates were sent to the neighbouring counties (Tulcea, Tecuci, Fălciu, Roman, Tutova and Vaslui), but in vain because the latter also lacked foods because of the war: at the beginning of 1917, the situation was desperate [6].

Local folklore and documents of the time refer to suspicion of cannibalism, crime and other extreme deeds to get food.

After World War II, Romania lived other terrible moments: for two years, 1946-1947, famine ravaged because of the political regime, of the terrible drought and the agrarian reform initiated by the communist Government led by Dr. Petru Groza. The Government wanted to reinstate peasants by giving them back the lands they one owned. The reform was a complete failure and it engendered poverty and famine. At the time, it was known as the Great Famine. The harvest was poor because of the land crumbling, of the lack of know-how of the new landowners, and of the lack of agricultural equipment.

The drought of 1945 resembles to a starvation genocide. There were between 115,000 and 300,000 victims. The authorities forged the death certificates (they forbade mentioning famine as the death cause).

Bread became rare and, when one could find it, it was a luxury costing 2,000 RON the loaf; potatoes, the poor man's food, were also 2,000 RON/kg. Unfortunately, the ones needing protection from the landlords became victims of the political reforms.

CONCLUSIONS

From 1970, food crises have stricken tens of African and Asian countries.

Nowadays, food shortage partially depends on yields. It has become a market phenomenon often triggered by wars.

We can say that food deficits have several causes. Climate factors combine with wars, market speculations, forecast errors, poor management (administration developed rapidly in the 13th and 14th centuries, but its means were limited), incoherent, uncertain fiscal policy that sets all the burden of taxation on the population, and political power practices that are irresponsible or corrupted.

In conclusion, we may say that in a democratic world food shortage is rare and less serious: however, we need to be responsible, always on guard, and re-read history to bear in mind the power of food shortage and its damaging effects on mankind.

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