H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Vernon. *Hunger: A Modern History.* Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007. 369 S. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02678-0.

Reviewed by Matthew Hilton (Department of Modern History, University of Birmingham)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2008)

Article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) established for the post-Second World War international order that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family."[1] In short, it had become a right for citizens of the world not to suffer from hunger. This was by no means an uncontroversial feat, as is evident in the persistent suffering of millions of people around the world today as such rights remain aspirational rather than achievable. Indeed, the political philosopher of human rights, Thomas Pogge, tells us that we avoid such positive duties to protect the welfare rights of others by maintaining a distance between the poverty of the developing world and our own affluent civilization: out of sight, out of mind, so to speak, or, as Pogge puts it, the hungry are "a remote good cause alongside the spotted owl."[2]

Yet, in 1948, Article 25 attested to the culmination of a long history of the politicization of hunger through which the gap was narrowed between the material experience of the unfortunate and the response of the providers of welfare. This is the subject of James Vernon's *Hunger* , in which he traces the changing meaning of hunger, showing that by the mid-twentieth century the hungry were no longer the agents of their own suffering but the victims of modern markets and societies. In so doing, Vernon hopes his case study stands in for an explanation of Britain's transformation from a liberal to a social democracy.

Vernon begins his account by setting out the Malthusian orthodoxy that hunger was an inevitable and necessary condition. Over the course of the nineteenth century, hunger was discovered as a humanitarian issue. It was not so much that humanitarianism was a new social impulse, but that new forms of journalism and reporting "generated a circle of humanitarian virtue: the journalist proved his integrity by reporting the urgent misery of hunger and starvation; those reports elicited and created an immediate humanitarian response among readers, whose philanthropy in turn demonstrated their own virtue and redeemed the lives of the recipients" (p. 29). Having transformed the hungry into victims, all was set for the politicization of hunger. Vernon explores how the hunger strikes of Irish and Indian nationalists, as well as suffragettes, and the hunger marches of the unemployed, inverted the supposedly natural laws of the market to highlight both the strength and fortitude of the hungry, as well as the illegality of a state that subjugated them.

By the turn of the twentieth century, it appeared that hunger might again be depoliticized as nutritionists and food scientists seemingly made hunger purely a technical issue. However, in redefining hunger as malnutrition (as opposed to under-nutrition), these experts also raised the possibility that hunger could be avoided through careful planning. Hunger, therefore, again became a political issue as its management came to be seen as an aspect of social welfare. Vernon then draws out a number of case studies–the school meal, works canteen, community restaurants, and rationing programs of the two world wars, among others–to show how food policy became linked to social democratic welfare while also retaining its disciplinary character as such ventures sought to create responsible, rational consumers who would heed their own nutritional requirements.

This is a rich and entertaining history. Vernon deals with a potentially enormous subject extremely well. His chosen case studies are excellent. There is great detail on the political protests of the hungry, on the development of nutritional science as a distinct field of knowledge, and on the post-Second World War pursuit of authentic working-class life histories: here, the stories of childhood deprivation during the "hungry thirties" were used to validate the achievements of social democratic planning ("never again"). Vernon, too, is good on the location

of British social and political history within an imperial and a transnational context. For instance, his account of the humanitarian discovery of hunger in Britain is bolstered by a discussion of the importance of photographic evidence of the Indian famine at the turn of the twentieth century. And, he traces the career of John Boyd Orr, author of *Food, Health and Income* (1936), winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his research into nutrition, and first director-general of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization, to demonstrate Britain's contribution and linkage to international food policy developments.

Vernon clearly has ambitions for what he identifies as his "difficult second album" (p. vii). This is not a book that is merely a cultural history of the changing meaning of hunger; it is also an assertion that "even hunger, that most material of conditions, was also the work of culture … how hunger was understood shaped who actually experienced it" (p. viii). His narrative is steeped in Foucauldian understandings of governance and discipline. Vernon is at pains not to write a history of a monolithic state imposing food policy from above, and he dogmatically avoids an account of the forward march of labor triumphing over the social and economic inequities that it believed to give rise to hunger in the first place. Instead, Vernon sees power and government everywhere; his agents of change are the humanitarians, philanthropists, employers, experts, and scientists who played as strong a role in the establishment of social democracy as any formal political movement. Indeed, their models for dealing with hunger retained ideals of good citizenship such that discipline went hand in hand with welfare. This, Vernon argues, is the book's most significant contribution: his case study of hunger complicates any neat trajectory from liberal to social democracy, and he shows how the welfare state continued to retain elements of both.

There is a churlish tone to Vernon's assertions in this regard. His references "to the powerful and enduring narrative of the labour movement's heroic struggle" perhaps speaks of a battle fought out within the social historical profession one decade and more ago (p. 273). More important, though, are Vernon's claims for cultural history, eschewing any causal structural explanations, especially of a material kind. It results, in this work, in a certain fragmentation of his subject; for example, the connections between chapters and case studies is not always apparent, especially when he refuses to impose any grand narrative on what could link the politics of the hunger march with the politics of the hunger strike. Both were politicizations of hunger but neither were the consequence of any apparent causal phenomenon. At times, it means his narrative becomes rather descriptive, especially when running through the seemingly endless committees and institutions devoted to food and nutrition policy between the wars. In addition, it focuses the research on experts and professional forms of knowledge that make the book increasingly parochial. The imperial and transnational context is lost in the latter chapters, as Vernon travels through the more familiar territories of food policy in Britain, which seemingly take him away from the subject of hunger. These chapters make this a book very much about Britain for all the wider claims of its title.

Nevertheless, his emphasis on professional knowledge about hunger means he provides the food equivalent to the sort of work that has been conducted by the likes of Nikolas Rose into the "psy" professions and the disciplining of the self in the twentieth century (*Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* [1999]). Clearly, this has its merits, not least because it admits to the plurality of politics and power and embraces a whole range of other actors who have had an impact on British social and political life. Future work could be done on the types of expert committees Vernon uncovers and which mark the linkages between nineteenth-century philanthropic voluntarism and the more professionally managed nongovernmental organizations of today. Although Vernon would recoil at the suggestion, one could almost see in the rise of these experts a material explanation for social change. "The rise of professional society," as Harold Perkin put it (*The Rise of Professional Society* [1990]), is certainly not the type of history that Vernon is after, but in his desire to distance himself from what he sees as traditional labor and political history, he does create a new breed of hero out of his bureaucrats and technocrats. Indeed, there is a curious optimism in Vernon's narrative, and he ends his book on a political note, seeing in these expert, professional, nonsystematic solutions to social problems a pragmatism that could well be applied to many of today's pressing inequities. In this regard, this is social history that seeks to rescue the middle-class liberal from the enormous condescension of posterity.

But other structuring narratives might also be suggested. One that appeals to this reviewer is the material base offered by rising mass consumption and the development of consumer society as the basis of citizenship. To this end, hunger–or nonconsumption–represents most clearly those who are excluded and denied citizenship. In this regard, it is easy to see how

hunger is a political tactic in consumer society: nonconsumption is as prominent an intervention as any symbolic image in the society of the spectacle. Hunger was and is the glaring anomaly of society's "progress," and thus the spread of mass consumption and the attendant assumptions about prosperity made hunger all the more political. By choosing not to consume, the hunger striker appeared to deny the legitimacy of a society supposedly guaranteeing a decent standard of living. The authorities were well aware of the politics of consumption. As Vernon tells us, when Mahatma Gandhi fasted in 1943, the British removed him not to a prison but to the Aga Khan's palace outside Poona. They publicized the splendor surrounding the ascetic nationalist, such that Gandhi was reported in the British press to be on a "Luxury Fast" (p. 77) Gandhi, too, was aware of the consuming aspects of his politics. His fasts ought usefully to be situated alongside his boycotting of British goods and his promotion of domestic-made products in the *swadeshi* movement.

There is, too, a further international dimension to "acquiring the right not to be hungry" (p. 15). The social democratic experience of continental Europe is absent from these pages, as is the articulation of a "freedom from want" so central to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Transnationally, Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (2005) has most ably discussed the movement to measure and compare living standards between the wars. These indices ought to be placed alongside Vernon's account of social nutrition since they fed into such declarations as Article 25 of the UDHR. By ignoring these aspects of the debate, Vernon overemphasizes the importance of Britain in the period prior to 1945. In his refusal to examine the advocacy of prominent British-based nongovernmental organizations to tackle issues of global poverty and hunger thereafter, he likewise underemphasizes Britain's continued contribution to transnational understandings of hunger (the shift from aid to trade in international development policies from the 1960s could have taken this cultural history of the changing meaning of hunger one stage further).

Nevertheless, this is still a compelling account. At the very least, what *Hunger* does is continue to unpack the meaning of the political and the social within modern British studies, which will further fuel other investigations of this sort. What Vernon's deliberately unromantic approach to the past has done is point to both the very spectacular and the very ordinary elements of the politicization of an issue. It is to be expected that future studies will continue to explore the multiple sites of power, politics, and governance in a similar manner.

Notes

[1]. UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Resolution 217A (III), 1948.

[2]. Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 26.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Matthew Hilton. Review of Vernon, James, *Hunger: A Modern History*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14482

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.