Introduction: ‘The unremitting pressure’: On hunger politics

The English landscape speaks a series of truths about hunger that generations of scholars have failed to grasp. In the extraordinarily rich place-name nomenclature of rural and coastal England hunger is writ more subtly and lucidly than in any study. In such enclosure-era names as Hunger Hill (Cheshire and Lancashire), Hungry Down (Aldington, Kent) and Starvation Point (Whitstable, Kent) we see an admission at once sad and satirical that the land was never a promise of plenty to those who farmed it, let alone to those who laboured upon it. If particular fields might prove unresponsive to the landlord and farmers’ investment – ‘you’ll end up poor and hungry if you till this ground…’ – the very deliberate point about naming hunger in the landscape speaks to a more profound truth: that the residents of rural England well knew that a plentiful past was no assurance of future abundance. Plenty and precarity walk hand in hand. Hunger persisted not only as a spectre of the past but as an all too real threat in the present. One harvest failure, one drought, one dearth, one failure of law and governance, was enough to plunge much of the population – in rural England as much as the towns – towards starvation. And as such place names as Cold Comfort Farm and Hunger Farm also obliquely attest, hunger might also come from economic failure rendering you poor and unable to afford to subsist when times were tough. As the work of literary scholars has shown, the fear of hunger was arguably one of the defining tropes of Georgian and early Victorian fiction; hunger was written into the imaginative landscape of the realm.  

The implications are clear enough: whatever the actual individual and collective experience, hunger in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century was not banished from the land but instead writ into the very essence, self-perception and fabric of its being. And yet, so the received line goes, by the early decades of the eighteenth century the peoples of England could truly be said to be beyond the ravages of famine. As Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda have recently reiterated, England ‘escaped’ from the
clutches of severe food scarcity and famine ‘much earlier’ than most other European states; southern England experienced its last ‘major’ famine in the 1590s, northern England a little later in the 1620s.2

There is, it would be foolish to deny, not only a quantitative but also a qualitative difference between the experience and effects of mass famine deaths and the fear of hunger. But the very etymology of European words associated with famine betrays a complex relationship between food, hunger and, ultimately, starvation, and these meanings and relationships have changed over time. If we might now accept a definition of famine as the mass inability to access sufficient food leading to excessive levels of mortality from starvation and hunger-related diseases, this is a relatively recent conception. In early modern England, as Ó Gráda reminds us, ‘dearth signified dearness, but meant famine’, but when the shared experience of mass famine deaths was no longer held in the collective memory the meanings of dearth and famine became distinct: a lack of food, an absolute and catastrophic want of food. Conversely, carestia, the Italian word for famine, connotes dearness, while the closest German equivalent, Hungersnot, relates to a scarcity of food.3

The relationship between food, hunger and famine is evidently not a simple or static one. We know that in ‘post-famine’ England – though I will challenge even this idea later – beyond hunger remaining a fear and a threat, poor consumers still rioted to protect their access to food, while politicians legislated and intervened in the marketing of foodstuffs, occasionally acting to ensure popular access to food.4 Hunger – whether felt or feared – was important enough to the poor that 115 out of 341 working-class autobiographical writings analysed by Emma Griffin explicitly mentioned hunger. This is probably an under-representation as some of the writers may have chosen not to write about matters relating to diet and food.5 By the turn of the nineteenth century even food security was called into question. The war with Napoleonic France and its allies severely limited the ability to import grain in times of dearth,6 although the mortality rate – in itself not an unproblematic measure – as a recent study has reasserted remained broadly similar in the crises of the 1790s and early 1800s to non-crisis years.7 Further, Rev. Malthus was able to warn of population checks in a nation whose fertility rate outstripped its ability to increase its food stocks,8 and yet even in the so-called ‘Hungry Forties’ – the term an invention by supporters of free trade in the late nineteenth century – when famine stalked Ireland and threatened Scotland, England remained free from famine.9

As Amartya Sen’s influential theory of exchange entitlements suggests, beyond problems in the food supply the mechanisms by which people were precipitated into starvation were many. The failure of a family’s ability to exchange their primary entitlement – their labour for food – was in itself made up of myriad contexts and complexities: from ill health and family disaster, through recession, to shifts in social policy and economic restructuring.10 Ergo, if famine was not a product of simple causal relationships, then comprehending the many stages before death from want is vital in
understanding not only the experience of everyday life but also the making of famine itself. Fixating on the absolutes of famine, and Malthusian population checks, arguably acts to limit us in asking interesting questions of the period after which ‘famine became unthinkable’ and in understanding the complexities of what happened before famine. It also acts to temporally fore-shorten understandings of famine, focusing attention back on exploring the dynamics of dearth in the medieval and early modern periods. Of course this is not to say that such questions are not unimportant – they are, on which see below – or that medievalists and early modernists should not persist with such studies. Indeed, recent work by Jonathan Healey, Buchanan Sharp and Bruce Campbell shows the value of close, careful scrutiny of the archive in deepening our understanding of the history of famine. Rather, for the ‘post’-famine period, we need to acknowledge that famine for individuals and plebeian communities – that is to say, death from want – did not suddenly become ‘unthinkable’. Perishing from lack of food remained a constant fear and threat in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The peoples of England were beyond the ravages of famine yet far from liberated from the effects and fears of hunger and starvation. It is the consequences of this fear and threat that demand our attention.

The issue, at heart, remains a paradoxical one. This can be understood as follows. The 1840s witnessed hunger and malnutrition in Britain, and mass starvation in Ireland and elsewhere in the empire. The ‘Hungry Forties’ came, however, amidst claims that absolute biological want had been eliminated in Britain. Rising agricultural production and the development of integrated national and international markets combined with the (supposed) net of the poor laws meant that by the early nineteenth century the threat of hunger as an ‘unremitted pressure’ (in the words of Rev. Townsend subsequently quoted by Marx in Capital) had lifted for the peoples of Britain. Wages and employment had replaced access to food as the critical nexus of politics. This was the age of Malthus: hunger, as James Vernon has put it, provided a ‘natural basis for moral order, in forcing the indigent to work and preventing unsustainable overpopulation’. To be hungry, so the discourse went, was to be an object of ‘opprobrium, not compassion’. Only in response to the global famines of the 1840s did recognisably humanitarian discourses evolve, new modes of reporting emotionally connecting the comfortable with the sufferings of the starving. For much of the eighteenth century an expression of hunger found form in food rioting, the practice arguably being the defining protest of eighteenth-century Britain. The ‘death’ of this tradition with the repression of the national waves of food rioting in 1795–6 and 1800–1 did not suddenly mean, though, that hunger and access to food was no longer a political issue for either poor consumers or the rulers of Britain.

Part of the problem is rooted in the often inconsistent relationship between food, hunger and famine as written in histories of industrialising England. These paradoxes are writ through the historiography and yet remain implicit rather than explicit: famine was, as Richard Hoyle has recently put it, now
'unthinkable' in England and yet the period witnessed the rise of food rioting as a national phenomenon in the mid-eighteenth century and, later, the Malthusian obsession with population checks. In many ways this is a reflection of, as Keith Wrightson put it, the enclosure by time period and theme of English social history (though one could also add economic history and historical geography to this mix). Famines belong to the medievalists and early modernists; food riots, after E.P. Thompson, belong to students of the eighteenth century; and, due to the legacy of Malthus and the Great Famine of Ireland, theorising about famine and populations belongs to scholars of the nineteenth century. Yet in all this neat demarcation, hunger is not so much written out as not ever really written in. Indeed, if recent scholarship has advanced our knowledge of the contours, effects and meanings of famine in England (and in England in relation to other countries), the depth and persistence of food rioting, and the engagement between popular politics and consumption, the effects of hunger in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remain subject to remarkably little study. Peter Gurney’s fine paper on the politics of consumption in the 1840s and Griffin’s analysis of diet and the experience of hunger in working-class autobiographical writings are the notable exceptions that prove the rule. In part, the questions asked have remained too narrow: ‘Did the peasants really starve?’, ‘Were food rioters really hungry?’, ‘Did living standards improve?’. Our fixations have been too squarely framed on narrowly causal relationships.

It is betwixt and between these paradoxes that this book exists. Focusing on the period from the late eighteenth century through to the crisis of the 1840s, this study systematically explores what I conceive to be ‘hunger politics’, or rather ‘the politics of hunger’: the articulations of hunger as a tool of protest by poor consumers; its framing as a problem in the making of public policy; and its (elite) political languages and the attendant effects of these. There are three interrelated aims and objectives: first, to understand how hunger was mobilised and articulated by poor consumers during subsistence crises, and, relatedly, how the discourse of hunger persisted ‘beyond’ the food rioting tradition. Second, to examine the ways in which the polity (both local and national) framed hunger as a public policy problem, initially in relation to social policy responses to rising food prices and declining real wages, and then in terms of how the poor were made as biological subjects (and the attendant political projects to manage and regulate pauper bodies). Third, to analyse how hunger was made and used, in elite terms in the making of hunger as a biopolitical force in the period, thinking through the influence of Malthus’ writings in the emergence of hunger as a tool of sovereign power, and popularly, through the ways in which the hunger of others – not least the near subjects of Empire in Ireland – informed a relational understanding of hunger.

Considerations of the politics of hunger have almost totally omitted the period from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, the exceptions being Roger Wells’ magisterial treatment of the hunger crises
of the Napoleonic Wars, *Wretched Faces*, and a small body of recent work reassessing the ‘Hungry Forties’. Indeed, even the voluminous historiography considering the influence and accuracy of Malthus’ dire predictions has tended to focus on the issue of birth rates and demography rather than on the politics of hunger per se. Further, the dynamics for the period beyond the mid-nineteenth century altered, with food – and hence bodily subsistence – now existing in a global context, and hunger thus concurrently, as Vernon puts it, starting to be conceived of as a global social problem rather than an unavoidable natural phenomenon.

This is a book concerned with the totemic spaces of hunger in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England: the (primarily) agrarian communities of southern and eastern England, the places where the nationally dominant occupational group resided and where debates about the nature of hunger and poverty were located and framed. Notwithstanding rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, England in the period remained an essentially rural nation, both in terms of settlement and population – 1851 marks the first point at which the majority of the population lived in towns and cities – and in terms of political identity, with Parliament dominated by landowners and much political discourse dictated by agrarian concerns, not least in terms of poverty. This is not to deny the importance of the experiences of those who lived and worked elsewhere. Indeed, in many ways this is a study about a more-than-rural England, one that has dominant geographical foci but that often draws upon other places and experiences, other circuits and networks, not least in the final chapter, which begins to think about how the hunger of others beyond Britain was understood. But in essence, for much of the period the problem – and hence politics – of hunger remained defiantly told as agrarian. This book reflects these dynamics.

What follows in this chapter is structured as follows. It starts by examining in detail our existing understanding, surveying the ways in which hunger has been told but more often erased from the field, and the legacy of the misuse of hunger as a concept in history of protest. In so doing, it details the key premise of the book, that the politics of hunger was one of the defining dynamics and discourses of the period, something articulated in different ways by those pauperised, by politicians and by theorists alike. The chapter ends by detailing the overall structure and by mapping out the six thematic chapters that follow.

**Escaping hunger**

‘History, it appears, cannot escape hunger.’ So Vernon began his *Hunger: A Modern History*. If his book was an attempt to chart how attitudes to hunger changed from perceiving it as either divine providence or fecklessness to instead a collective, social problem, his premise is important here for it explicitly acknowledges that even after England had ‘rid itself of famine’, hunger
‘remained endemic in Britain’. That in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus respectively first ‘establish[ed] the modern political of economy of hunger’ is, so Vernon suggests, telling. Hunger needed to be understood, theorised and cured precisely because it remained a problem. Indeed, the heroic story of rapidly rising agricultural productivity – by 1850 the output per acre was higher in Britain than anywhere else in Europe, Belgium excepted – might have acted to banish famine but it did not end hunger. Higher outputs supported population growth which, in turn, made possible industrialisation as those once tied to the land migrated to industrial and urban centres and fed, so the story goes, a virtuous circle of growth and prosperity. Conversely, enclosure, agrarian capitalism and the creation of the factory system all acted to create a precarious market dependence which kept the wage labourer locked in a cycle of perpetual poverty and hunger.

If all of this is to paint with a broad brush, it is necessarily so, for in thinking about hunger in the period historians have tended to reduce the issue to data-heavy aspatial debates about the standard of living, one of the totemic debates of modern British history. 1750 appears to have been something of a watershed for rural workers. Before that point male and female wages were increasing and the cost of goods was declining, thanks to rising agricultural productivity, low and stable food prices, nominal population growth, and competition for labour from the expanding rural industries keeping wage rates up. There are, of course, exceptions. Some rural industrial communities were already in long-term decline: by the 1720s, for instance, the ‘golden age’ for the serge weavers and combers of Devon was already over. Thereafter, so a broad consensus goes, the standard of living of working people declined. As Griffin has recently asserted, while analysis of the standard of living of working people was once a heterogeneous field split into ‘pessimists’ and ‘optimists’, since the turn of the century there has been a narrowing of the methodological approach that privileges the use of quantifiable series and a clear consensus that living standards declined. The impact of ‘the inexorable march of statistics’ is, so Griffin asserts, now acting to silence the voices of those who suffered want and poor diets, as such quantitative studies are not only too narrowly framed but also almost self-contradictory. Thus even chief pessimist Charles Feinstein’s data shows real wages rising by almost 40 per cent between 1780 and 1850. Similarly Gregory Clark’s analyses have shown that agricultural labourers wages rose by 50 per cent in real terms between 1800 and 1850 while those for building craftsmen in the same period increased by some 70 per cent. Studies using other measures of living standards beyond real wages, including calorific intake and GDP per capita, have all come to the same partial and problematic conclusions too.

What of the rural situation? And what about the disaggregated experience? We know that in rural areas, notwithstanding continued increases in agricultural output, population growth, while regionally uneven, acted to increase the labour supply and depress wages and increase the risk (and rates) of un- and
under-employment. Against this trend we know that employment opportuni-
ties in other rural industries increased in the second half of the eighteenth
century, although in some places long-established cottage-based industries
were in terminal decline. We also know that poor relief became less generous,
and parish vestries applied greater stringency in determining relief policy –
until structural changes or crises hit. 40 We also know that in parishes subject
to enclosure, poor rates tended to increase, inevitably increasing dependency
on waged labour and the vagaries of the market and reducing opportunities
for ‘sources of subsistence other than wages’. 41 In the Lincolnshire parish
of Frampton on the enclosure of Holland Fen poor rates tripled, peaking
in 1769, the year of enclosure. 42 Poor harvests acted to reduce the demand
for (relatively) highly paid harvest work – something that men, women and
children benefitted from – and thus the string of poor harvests in the 1750s
and 1760s and again in the mid- to late 1790s and early 1800s hit rural
families especially hard. Against this dynamic, post-1750 year-long ‘living-in’
service also declined while employment in agriculture became increasingly
seasonal. 43

Ian Gazeley and Nicola Verdon’s analysis of the surveys of Frederick
Eden and David Davies conducted in the 1790s also usefully reminds us
of regional variations – labouring households in the agrarian south and east
were far more impoverished than those living in the Midlands and the north,
though experiences might vary from parish to parish – but also tells us that
almost every labouring family was living under the ‘poverty line’, especially
if they had to support children but did not yet have the income from child
labour. 44 Of course, given that the data was collected in the crisis years of
the 1790s Gazeley and Verdon’s conclusions might be unduly pessimistic,
especially so when compared to relatively good years for labouring families
in the early 1810s, mid-1820s and late 1830s. And yet, using a very different
approach and archival material, Griffin’s conclusions are broadly similar: for
rural families in the first half of the nineteenth century, and especially those
in the south and east, ‘wages and family incomes hardly moved’ and their diet
was ‘insufficient for all the household’s needs’. Ergo, in comparison to fam-
ilies in industrialising districts, plebeian agrarian families were more likely
to feel the effects of hunger and to live most in dreadful fear of the perma-
threat of hunger the most. 45 As T.L. Richardson has shown for Lincolnshire,
drawing on a variety of quantitative and qualitative evidence, the war years
of the 1790s, 1800s and early 1810s saw a steady decline in labouring living
standards, and then as agricultural commodity prices collapsed at the end
of the wars after a short respite, wages started to tumble, opportunities
for women and children (with some exceptions) declined, and unemploy-
ment started to become endemic, with up to a third of labourers in some
Lincolnshire parishes being employed directly by the parish by the late
1820s. 46 This situation, as chapter three explores in detail, was broadly true
of the south and east. 47 Real wages might have nominally increased for some
families in some years but the situation was so uneven, so changeable, so
complex that to speak of the experience of the rural worker is to ride roughshod over difference.

Griffin’s paper is novel in combining a central focus on living standards with an emphasis on understanding the poor’s self-representations of hunger. Indeed, while hunger might be an implicit emphasis in the standard-of-living literature – and even an explicit reference in recent work on caloric intake – it is neither the central theme nor expressed in terms of either plebeian experience or even policy problem. Nor is it something explored in recent scholarship on famine in a European context. It features not in the index of Alfani and Ó Gráda and is mentioned only seven times on five pages in the text: ‘hunger-induced disease’, ‘the worst years of hunger and famine’, ‘the great hunger’, starvation as ‘the fault of the hungry’, ‘four devastating series of “hunger”’, ‘the “hunger” continued’, ‘no need to distinguish between the deadly hunger that produced it and normal hunger’. The same also applies to Ó Gráda’s Famine: A Short History, wherein hunger is mentioned seven times and then only en passant. This is not a criticism but rather an observation. Hunger has not been taken seriously by either standard-of-living historians or famine historians: it exists as a context or label not as a category of analysis.

The same is also true for work exploring the impact of Malthusian thought and examining the veracity of Malthus’ claims about the impact of the old poor laws – there was never one law, hence the plural – on the morals and marriage practices of the rural labouring poor. For instance in Samantha Williams’ fine Poverty, Gender and the Lifecycle Under the English Poor Law, the latest and arguably most systematic treatment of population and the poor laws, hunger pervades the analysis – indeed it arguably underwrites the critical theme of the changing contours of need – but is not once made explicit. By way of a further example, poor law historian James Huzel’s study of the ‘popularisation’ of Malthus is threaded through with a rich analysis of the radical languages of need and plebeian rights in opposition to the amoral moralities of Malthus’ disciples but hunger, again, provides an implicit context rather than an explicit focus.

And yet, as Griffin’s suggestive paper shows, hunger mattered enough to working people that they committed their thoughts, fears and experiences to paper. For between being replete, with no fear of want in the future, to death from want there exists a wide spectrum of hungers. Famine forms one – horrific – end of the spectrum but it is not the spectrum of human experience. There are, as noted, a small number of other exceptions to this rule. Vernon’s splendid Hunger: A Modern History provides an ambitious attempt to chart the changing ways in which we have understood hunger and felt about the hungry, focusing specifically on the emergence from the middle of the nineteenth century of the ‘modern understanding’ of hunger as not (just) an innate part of the human condition but rather something made and socially shared. But Vernon’s account, locating the British experience in the wider co-constituting circuits of empire, begins when this study ends.
Likewise, Gurney’s fecund *Wanting and Having* picks up where this study ends, and, besides, it is not a study of hunger per se but rather an attempt to, in Gurney’s words, ‘uncover a genealogy of the modern consumer as well as links between the consumer and changing democratic discourses’. Hunger here is written as consumption’s other, the wanting to consumption’s having; the hungry are told as consumers denied basic rights by failures in the system (the Corn Laws; the want of the franchise; the New Poor Law). But there is also a deeper history to be told, a history of the way in which early economic historians used hunger as an explanatory category in analysing the stimuli to riot, and of the intellectual legacies thereof. The next section explores this conceptualisation and its historiographies.

‘Hunger riots’

Penned in the aftermath of the Midland Rising of 1607, Francis Bacon’s short essay ‘Of Seditions and Troubles’ has left a long shadow over studies of food and subsistence crises. Notwithstanding that he was clerk to the infamous and powerful Star Chamber, Bacon’s analysis of the popular politics of dearth was, as Steve Hindle has suggested, remarkably nuanced and sympathetic to the needs of poor rebels. Popular grievances could be understood in relation to two related concepts, ‘Poverty’ and ‘Discontent’, the latter ‘inflammations’ in the ‘Politique Body’, the former material want. And when the two states co-existed, there was instability and revolt (‘seditions’). The triggers of these seditions were many but the remedy was always to remove ‘that material cause of sedition … which is want and poverty in the estate’. And the worst sort of ‘sedition’ was triggered by dearth: ‘If this poverty and broken estate in the better sort be joined with a want and necessity in the mean people, the danger is imminent and great. For the Rebellions of the Belly are the worst.’

This is far more subtle than ‘empty bellies leads to rebellion’, for without, as Hindle puts it, ‘[p]essimism and frustration among the landed elite’ there would have been no revolt. Hunger was a result of a failure of paternalism, evidence of ‘discontent’ amongst the elites. But for all these sympathies and subtleties, Bacon’s analysis has been reduced to a portable and mutable phrase, something devoid of analysis and context, a reflexive take on agency and the working body: ‘rebellions of the belly’. Indeed, this misreading (and misappropriation) of Bacon’s work was total, coming from members of the establishment and radicals alike. Thus during the 1795 subsistence crisis no less a radical than John Thelwall berated ‘foolish dreaming politician’ Bacon for proposing a ‘sublime policy of reducing ten millions of people to the brink of famine in one country, in order at once to pinch and wring all sedition out of their stomachs’.

The legacy of Bacon’s phrase, if not his analysis, is most profound in our conceptualisation of *demotic* responses to dearth. Building upon the
discourse of earlier Malthusian/political economy readings of Bacon – Thomas Doubleday claimed in 1852 that as population ‘morbidly spreads’ the consequence was either mass emigration or ‘that worse sort of rebellions, which the wise Lord Bacon designates ‘rebellions of the belly’ – economic historians appropriated Bacon’s phrase as in itself a total explanation. To Donald Barnes, writing in 1930, ‘hunger riots’ – a telling tag – were prevalent between the restoration and the early nineteenth century but were ‘more or less alike’. In a Cartesian sense, they were the mechanical response of automata. ‘[N]othing is gained’, Barnes dismissively concluded, ‘by giving a detailed account of each one’. Thomas Ashton and Julia Sykes came to a similar conclusion. Quoting Bacon, they asserted that while ‘rebellions of the belly’ were endemic in the second half of the eighteenth century – ‘the instinctive reaction of virility to hunger’ – the effort involved in their study was ‘disproportionate to the value of any generalisation that would be likely to emerge’. To Walt Whitman Rostow – ‘the dean of the spasmodic school’, as E.P. Thompson so memorably put it – the relationship between hunger and riot was so immediate as for the latter to be absolutely predictable from the level of unemployment and food prices.

Early scholars of ‘public disorder’ were no less literal in thinking through the relationship between bellies and protest. The important foundational texts of Frank Darvall and, to a greater extent, Max Beloff may have done much to bring food riots to wider historical attention, but their analysis was no subtler than that of early economic historians. According to Darvall, food riots in the 1810s were the actions of ‘mobs’ acting to secure supplies, while to Beloff late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century ‘popular disturbances’ were direct functions of poor harvests and the fear of famine. Even the early works of George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm published in the 1950s, while admittedly not studies of popular responses to dearth per se, did not challenge the by now received wisdom that food riots were responses to want and hunger. Rudé’s otherwise politically sensitive study of the eighteenth-century London ‘mob’ acknowledged that the authorities thought that some ‘mobs’ were ‘prompted by hunger’ (my emphasis), without challenging their analysis. Hobsbawm’s essay ‘The machine breakers’ similarly asserted that however one tried to understand ‘miners riots’, ultimately most were responses to ‘high food-prices’, the inference being that absolute bodily need was the ultimate motive. As ‘recently’ as 1972, Lawrence Stone in The Causes of the English Revolution suggested that the English labourer did not take sides during the revolution because they had little to grumble about, their bellies being full. Or as Buchanan Sharp put it, ‘it is clear that [Stone] believes popular revolts to be the product of increasing impoverishment – what Francis Bacon in his essay “Of Seditions” called rebellions of the belly’. Even to R.B. Rose in his important but oft-forgotten first systematic study of popular responses to dearth, protests were variably described as ‘price riots’ or ‘hunger riots’, the connection again haunted by the spectre of Bacon’s misrepresented ghost.
The shift from conceptualising food riots as ‘rebellions of the belly’, or at least reactive responses to hunger, to something beyond spasm came with the publication of Thompson’s classic 1971 paper, ‘The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century’. Rejecting the ‘abbreviated view of economic man’ and ‘crass reductionism’ of the spasmodic school, ‘a product of a political economy which diminished human reciprocities to the wages-nexus’, Thompson suggested that such an approach:

may conclude investigation at the exact point at which it becomes of serious sociological or cultural interest: being hungry … what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason? And (having granted that the primary stimulus of ‘distress’ is present) does their behaviour contribute towards any more complex, culturally-mediated function, which cannot be reduced – however long it is stewed over the fires of statistical analysis – back to stimulus once again?

Thompson’s method, as is well known but bears repetition, was to examine the values that underpinned crowd actions. In so doing, he asserted that it was possible to read some ‘legitimising notion’ in ‘almost’ every food riot: food rioters’ actions were given legitimacy by their belief that they were defending rights and customs, and in so doing were supported in their critique – if not necessarily in their approach – by the ‘wider consensus of the community’.

It is important to note that Thompson’s paradigm shift did not deny the importance of hunger as motivational force, acknowledging the ‘self-evident truth’ that hungry people can protest, and that riots were ‘triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger’. Subsequent studies have tended though to ignore the issue of absolute material need and hunger either to focus instead on the meanings and practices of food rioting, or, missing Thompson’s point, attempting to assess how hungry food rioters actually were. The latter camp is best represented by Dale Williams’ 1976 response to Thompson that used demographic data to answer the question ‘were “hunger” rioters really hungry’? Acknowledging that the reception of Thompson’s paper had focused on the worth of his ‘moral economy’ concept, the ‘basic questions concerning the relationship between deprivation and popular violence’ had, as Williams put it, ‘so far … not been brought into the discussion’. The ensuing analysis of the demographic data for ‘rioting’ and ‘non-rioting’ communities for the ‘representative’ subsistence crisis of 1766–7 showed, so Williams claimed, that there were fewer conceptions in months of crisis in both sets of parishes. Ergo, ‘there was, no doubt, a desperation fostered by real suffering. But what is equally clear from the similar demographic performance of the rioting and non-rioting parishes is that there was no direct causal relationship between deprivation and protest.’ The conclusion? ‘Yes, hunger rioters were hungry’ and ‘many ordinary people’ faced great difficulty in finding ‘sufficient food for their families’. Given
this conclusion, and allowing for the existence of Thompson’s value system ‘which could justify physical protest’, ‘why’, Williams asked, ‘was rioting not more general?’

Returning to the theme eight years later, Williams suggested that ‘serious deprivation’ was ultimately kept at bay and starvation avoided in 1766 by ‘concessions’ and ‘vigorous programmes’ of poor relief.

This is not to say that Williams’ analysis is either wrongheaded or necessarily incorrect. Indeed, notwithstanding subsequent critiques of his approach and conclusions, the role of biological stimuli in popular responses to dearth has resurfaced as a factor in more recent analyses. Using price as a proxy for hunger, John Archer has suggested that while there the relationship between prices and riots was ‘evident but not strong’ it was ‘surely no coincidence that food rioting declined rapidly as a nationwide phenomenon after 1818, when wheat prices fell’. The title alone of John Bohstedt’s *The Politics of Provisions* is suggestive, and his comments on the first page proper of the book are definitive in asserting the relationship: ‘For centuries in times of dearth ... driven by gut-feelings of hunger and justice, and steered by memory and calculation, English communities sought forcible remedy, declaring *their* will and right to survive, and demanding action from the wealthy and powerful.’ Provision politics, Bohstedt asserts, can be ‘summed up as common people’s collective actions to avert acute hunger, and their ruler’s responses.’ In essence, though, the supposedly sustained emphasis on hunger in Bohstedt’s study is illusory, a function not of rich contextual readings but of the historiographical readings, his analysis repeating the themes of earlier work or, at best, making suggestions as to the importance and complexity of the languages of hunger. Roger Wells’ otherwise magisterial study of the food crises of the 1790s, *Wretched Faces*, while pulling no punches in asserting the deep bodily suffering of the poor – hence the graphic title of his book – is similarly oddly reserved in thinking through hunger, too locked in the dominant idioms and debates about famine.

In all of this there is something qualified, something intellectually cautious; something fearful of sounding too much like a Roscowian by even uttering the word hunger in relation to protest. And yet, as we have seen, hunger was an ever-present danger, a genuine fear, something the majority of families in Britain were only one disaster away from suffering, from *feeling* the effects of a biting hunger. None of this is to say that the influence of Thompson’s moral economy thesis has been a baleful thing. Analyses of the values and the attendant protest practices and meanings that underpinned popular responses to dearth have arguably been one of the richest and most fertile fields of social historical inquiry over the past forty years. But in the emphasis on malpractice, duplicitous trading, and the interplay between poor, working consumers and the rulers of Hanoverian England, the absolute biological basis of want and need has been unheeded. Hunger has instead been left to become the conceptual context that scholars of living standards want reduced to measures and models – hunger implicit but written out.
Structure and argument

As detailed in the first section of this chapter, this study has three interrelated aims and objectives, which map directly onto the three sections of the book: 1) how hunger was mobilised and articulated by the poor (‘The fight against being hungry’); 2) how hunger was framed as a policy problem (‘Managing hunger’); and 3) how hunger was made and used by elites and relationally understood (‘Theorising hunger’). Each section is divided into two chapters.

Chapter one goes beyond, as E.P. Thompson put it, the ‘self-evident truth’ that people are more likely to protest when hungry. Instead, it asks how their hunger – and that of their communities – and their fear of hunger was mobilised in the food riots of the eighteenth century. It begins with the first national wave of food riots in 1740 and ends with the catastrophic subsistence crisis of 1800–1. In so doing, it shows that, against official discourses which recognised the hunger of the poor, most protests – and increasingly so over time – resorted to what I label the discourse of starvation. Indeed, the discourse of hunger was rather different, an almost polite, imploring language that spoke deferentially of need, and thus was used in Thompsonian moral-economy ‘negotiations’ between poor consumers and patrician rulers. Conversely, the discourse of starvation was much more muscular, a deliberately provocative and often viscerally violent threat, an attempt to emphatically assert their right to immediate redress: if you do not act we will act, for we will not let you starve us. In the crises of the 1790s and early 1800s this discourse was increasingly taken up by the radical cause, while, in turn, the language of radicalism increasingly bled into the protest practices and claims of food rioters, not least in terms of the frequency of the claim that protestors would rather starve than submit to tyranny.

The bitter repression of the subsistence protests of the 1790s and early 1800s supposedly led to the end of the of the food rioting tradition, with the fear generated by the trials and hangings combined with the militarised landscapes of Britain during the Napoleonic Wars supposedly extinguishing whatever will was left to openly resist. Poor consumers either now supported by the extension of support (for which see chapter three) or turned to the tools of terror – incendiarium, animal maiming and the sending of threatening letters – to protest their lot. At the same time, wages replaced the price of basic foodstuffs as the critical component in working families’ living standards. Not until the ‘Hungry Forties’ was hunger ‘rediscovered’. The ‘struggle over the representation of scarcity’, as Gurney has put it, was particularly acute in both the politicking of Chartism and the Anti–Corn Law League, but even this failed to truly penetrate the countryside. Chapter two questions this neat teleology, and instead details the ways in which the twin discourses of hunger and (especially) starvation persisted beyond 1801 and into the 1840s. In so doing it analyses the claims made in threatening letters, legal defences, claims made to (and quarrels with) poor law officials, as well as in popular political forms including speeches, broadsides and ballads, and
political journalism, not least the writings of that most prolific of radical political proselytisers William Cobbett. It shows that in a variety of contexts and in multiple forms, the articulation of hunger continued to be a central protest discourse of the poor, ultimately underpinning, whether implicitly or explicitly, all forms of protest. Moreover, as the analysis of radical writings shows, this was not something confined to the protests of the poor themselves, but also remained a critical discourse especially amongst agrarian political writers, before assuming wider popular political prominence as Chartist speakers and writers reanimated the politics of hunger. Indeed, protests in industrial and urban England in the 1840s continued to draw on this discourse and on this deep agrarian well of resistance. The issue of food thus provided a material and symbolic bridge between the city and the rural.

Social policy responses to the crises of the 1790s – and to the mass un- and under-employment of labouring families that overwhelmed the agrarian south and east on the end of the Napoleonic Wars – are supposedly so well understood that the ‘Speenhamland story’ of the introduction of de facto income support looms large over all our understandings of the histories of social welfare and remains a haunting presence in welfare debates in the neoliberal age. Further, what was a response to a problem of the English cornlands had universal material and political effects, from Speenhamland to Sheffield, Stoke and Sunderland, if you will. But while the impact of such schemes has been the subject of scrutiny ever since – from Malthus’ critique that they offered ‘a direct, constant, and systemical encouragement to marriage’ to more recent declamations by neoliberal politicians – the actual mechanisms and subsequent history of ‘bread scales’ remain little understood, while the history of the application of policy responses to hunger in rural England has been subject to remarkably little systematic scrutiny. Chapter three returns to the intentions and considers these histories. It starts from the understanding that the original intention of the Berkshire magistrates, as well as those elsewhere who quickly adopted similar policy prescriptions, were simple: to alleviate hunger and distress, and thus prevent riot and the destruction of property, the poor needed support depending on the price of bread, with the development of ‘bread scales’ as a deviation from casual relief to systematised, measured support. The analysis shows that there was not one Speenhamland scale but many Speenhamland-style scales, a variety of formal, semi-formal and ad hoc income support schemes. Subsequent perversions of the initial intentions behind Speenhamland-type payments meant that all agrarian workers became pauperised. Farmers, mindful that the parish would supplement working incomes, cut wages, thereby making need universal. This acted to further politicise poor law provision: in turn, plebeian poor law protests increasingly drew on the discourse of starvation. The further effect of making need universal, so this chapter argues, was that counter-intuitively the system required new modes of surveillance, as the vestry and the overseer(s) initially needed to know about the population of the parish. And as the costs of such schemes became a major burden on
ratepayers, so parish officers needed to know about the circumstances of all poor families. This is not to say that parish surveillance was a new phenomenon – it was arguably as old as the poor law itself – but rather that the value judgements made were now based on magistrates and parish officers devising universal measures of need. Hunger was now measured and quantified, the poor rendered as an undifferentiated body.

Chapter four extends this argument to think about the ways in which the imperative to define and measure informed the shaping and making of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (aka the New Poor Law) in the form of workhouse dietaries. By dictating what the poor ate, as opposed to what they might eat, it is argued that workhouse dietaries established an absolute biological minimum for bodily survival decided by individual poor law unions within perimeters set by the central state through the Poor Law Commission/Board. As is well known, such dietaries had profound consequences, in terms both of driving popular revulsion of the workhouse and high-profile scandals: for example, the publicising of inmates at the Andover workhouse notoriously gnawing at green bones to supplement their diets led to the replacement of the Poor Law Commission with the Poor Law Board. While the implications of workhouse dietaries have been subject to careful study, not least through the study of workhouse scandals, this chapter takes a broader perspective. It examines the makings of the idea of the dietary, analysing debates and discussion concerning both the physiological and practical science of pauper diet. In so doing, it analyses antecedents operated by separate parishes and pre-1834 poor law unions, before going on to explore the implementation of workhouse dietaries in the new centrally controlled but still locally operated system. It shows that this tension between the ideals of Somerset House – the administrative heart of the New Poor Law – and individual Boards of Guardians, who were almost invariably concerned more by economy and the politics of local provisioning, led to constant revisions and the refining of the model. The chapter also analyses the critiques of the system, exploring both the centrality of critiques to the politicking of radical politicians and to the rise of a particular type of humanitarianism, a concern with the bodily welfare of the poor that mirrored parallel movements over slavery and working conditions in factories and mines.

If chapters three and four analyse the practical politics and science of managing hungry bodies, the penultimate chapter takes a different approach by considering the ways in which hunger was made and used. It argues that by reducing working bodies to, as Giorgio Agamben conceived it, ‘bare life’, workhouse dietaries can be usefully understood as part of a wider shift of what Foucault labelled biopolitics, a ‘new’ technique of government that as its primary political strategy sought to administer ‘the basic biological features of the human species’. If the dietary was one of ‘an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations’, it is was of particular importance in the context of Britain – and therefore the wider British Empire – both because of
its scope and because it built upon an established critique of the workings of the pre-1834 poor laws. In particular, the influence of the claim made by Rev. Thomas Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (first published in 1798) that Speenhamland-style payments ‘afford[ed] a direct, constant and systematical encouragement to marriage, by removing from each individual that heavy responsibility … for bringing beings into the world which he could not support’ was especially profound. Malthus’ ideas were written into the very fabric of the New Poor Law, both literally in terms of separate male and female wards and figuratively in terms of practising ‘bare life’. Twelve years prior to the publication of Malthus’ *Essay*, Joseph Townsend in his *Dissertation on the Poor Law* had made the link even more explicit: ‘Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general it is only hunger which can spur and goad them [the poor] on to labour; yet our laws have said they shall never hunger.’ This went beyond metaphor: the poor, in Townsend’s conception, were actually beasts. Chapter five explores the genealogy of these intellectual and ideological understandings of bodily need and hunger, ideas that underpinned the systems analysed in chapters three and four. In so doing, it argues that this emergence was informed by, and a counterpart to, the racialisation of ‘the poor’, the process whereby working people, especially agricultural workers, were conceived and referred to as a distinct and decidedly animalistic race. By conceiving of the poor as a separate race, New Poor Law administrators and others were given moral consent to control the bodies of claimants, to experiment with forms of bodily control and the negation of individual agency in the making of new subjects. None of this is to say that effects of this racialisation for English labourers were the same as for black colonial subjects – the racisms were necessarily different, and the violence modulated in comparison to the total denial of rights that enslavement entailed, something in itself that fed the rise of what Ryan Hanley has called working-class racism – but, rather, that ‘the great chain of being’ had further sub-divisions.

Theorising hunger was not, so chapter six argues, something only possible through experience and mobilised only through developing new forms of control, but also something understood and mediated through the plight of distant others. In particular, the devastating famine in late 1840s Ireland was critical in shaping political languages of hunger in the Empire as a whole as well as amongst the peoples of Britain. This chapter does not explore the central governmental response to these famines – though this provides a critical context – but instead examines popular responses to the hunger of others in the 1840s. Distance here is conceived as not only those subjects of Empire in Ireland (and beyond), but also the responses of those in metropolitan and southern England to the privations of industrial workers and the Scottish rural poor in the ‘Hungry Forties’. In so doing, the chapter examines the discourses of response (and how these helped to shape understandings of hunger) as well as schemes to relieve famine and the distant hungry. It is
argued that against the ideologically driven official governmental responses to these different famines, those who were only one act of misfortune away from being incarcerated in the workhouse and only one or two generations away from experiencing absolute hunger were quick to respond by setting up collections and relief schemes. We see in such responses, the chapter goes on to argue, an extension of the protest discourses of hunger explored in chapter two, the popular cultural potency of the fear of hunger reinvigorated by ‘bare life’ workhouse regimes. The chapter also asserts that such relief schemes mirrored the political critiques of domestic and imperial food policy issued by Chartist thinkers. Hunger, in this way, was understood relationally, as something mediated not just by individual experience but also through the experiences of imagined others. This is not to deny the absolute privations and sufferings that were all too real to many English workers in the 1840s. Rather it is to acknowledge that the popular politics of hunger were not bound by the body or borders but were rooted in the uneven contours of solidarity and reciprocity. Nor is it to claim that this was something universal. It was not. ‘Shared’ experiences underpinned empathy for some people in some places, but did not absolutely break down an entrenched culture of xenophobia: attacks on Irish migrant workers remained a dismal part of working life in rural England.

It is important to note that, in short, this is not just a book about eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. As the conclusion asserts, it is a book that speaks directly to the hunger politics of early twenty-first-century England and beyond. If the threat of famine lifted from the peoples of England, the threat of hunger never did. We live in age of profound hunger, an age where an ever-increasing proportion of the population is reliant on food banks and other forms of charitable and third-sector support to simply subsist. The inadequacy of incomes to meet basic living costs, the slow withdrawal of the state from providing a basic safety net of support for those living on the breadline, the structural denial of support from the state for those who do not meet punitive criteria or who are otherwise hidden from the purview of the state, all have striking parallels with the desperate politics of Hanoverian England. For the less eligibility workhouse read universal credit, for the charitable subscription read the food bank, for the cries of hunger read the cries of hunger. For the indigent and feckless of the early nineteenth century read the beggars and work-shy scroungers of Tory Britain today. Hunger was, and remains, the cruellest pillar of policy.

Notes


Introduction

6 For the classic account see Wells, Wretched Faces.
21 For the most recent attempt at synthesis see: Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*.
23 Gurney, ‘Rejoicing in potatoes’; Griffin, ‘Diets’.
27 Wells, *Wretched Faces*.
33 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
from paying by the piece to time-regulated day labour was also a factor in increasing wage rates: A. Hann, ‘Kinship and exchange relations within an estate economy: Ditchley, 1680–1750’ (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1999).


37 Griffin, ‘Diets’, 72.


40 On these dynamics see C. Griffin, Protest, Politics and Work in Rural England, 1700–1850 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 17–34.


47 On this also see T.L. Richardson, ‘Agricultural labourers’ wages and the cost of living in Essex, 1790–1840: A contribution to the standard of living debate’,

48 Notably Floud, Fogel, Harris and Hong, *The Changing Body*, and Harris, Floud and Hong, ‘How many calories?’


52 Griffin, ‘Diets’.


54 Gurney, *Wanting and Having*, p. 17.


58 Ibid., pp. 276–7.


64 Thompson, ‘The moral economy’, 77.


70 Thompson, ‘Moral economy’, 78, 79.

71 Ibid., 78–9.

72 Ibid., 78.

73 Ibid., 77, 79.

74 Williams, ‘Were “hunger” rioters really hungry?’, 70, 71 n.4.

75 Ibid., 74, 75.


82 Thompson, ‘Moral economy’, 71.


89 Townsend, *Dissertation on the Poor Law*, p. 27.