

ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF HUNGER

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The global food crisis primarily affects developing countries. A little less than a billion people, mostly farmers, are undernourished, and about 2 billions people suffer from malnutrition, in other words, they do not eat food that is rich enough in essential micronutrients, which leads to blindness, rickets, brain disorders, and extreme vulnerability to diseases, and, among adults, difficulty in working. Two factors must be taken into consideration if we are to understand the causes of this disaster and respond to it appropriately.

The first is that it is not a technical problem resulting from a shortage of food, even in countries where the population is affected by hunger and malnutrition. As A. Sen wrote in *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, the famines that struck Bengal in 1943, Ethiopia repeatedly, or Bangladesh and the Sahel in 1973-1974, were not due to a decline in the availability of food, but to the loss of the ability to buy food by part of the population. Hunger therefore raises a problem of justice. It is not just a technical problem that an increase in production would solve. Rather than focusing on the drop in income among the hungry, we should consider the decline in their purchasing power. A comprehensive approach is necessary, such as the entitlement approach, which focuses on the decline of direct entitlement to food. It supposes that we integrate the problem of food production and distribution into a network of relationships that would explain why we can see millions of people dying of hunger in countries that have good food production, as happened in Bengal in 1943, or in countries that may even export food. "It is the totality of entitlement relations that governs whether a person will have the ability to acquire enough food to avoid starvation, and food supply is only one influence among many affecting his entitlement relations" (A. Sen).

This diagnosis can be used to describe the causes of the famines of 2008 and 2010-11, which must not be seen in terms of a crisis of supply, even if there was a dramatic increase in the price of grain, due among other factors to speculation. This diagnostic guides our response to the problem of world hunger. To talk about shortage is to say, as FAO used to say, that an increase in production would solve the problem. The use of farming methods that have worked in rich countries, where machines and inputs (pesticides, fertilizers) have increased production, would be seen as the solution. Some experts might say that GMOs are the cure-all! The misdiagnosis that considers the global food crisis as a problem of production promotes food security at any cost. It never questions global economic systems, the fact that international markets have been completely liberalized, leading to a situation where countries that subsidize their own agriculture, such as the USA and Europe, are selling their products at unbeatable prices, and, in doing so, are ruining the small local producers in Africa.

To say instead that hunger and malnutrition are a problem of justice is to reflect on the causes that have led to this unfair competition, and to think about food sovereignty rather than food security. Then the question is: how to produce? While we have tried until now to provide poor countries with food, first through international trade, then, to compensate for the harm done, through charity and humanitarian aid, we must think now about the ways in which poor countries can get their food. The promotion of food crops (and not just of the food intended for exportation) and the mastering of farming methods that are more suited to global warming and less dependent on the fluctuations in oil price, are some of the avenues that we must take.

However, just as there is not one cause for famine, there is no miracle cure either. The idea, rather, is that this approach to hunger in terms of justice calls for a cross-sectional analysis of the problem. The way in which the current United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food,

O. de Schutter, emphasizes the link between the issue of food, sustainable development, farming methods, land use, the necessary regulations on international trade, debt and global governance, is a step forward. Moreover, talking about the right to food is to recognize that we can no longer interpret human rights by focusing on those who have rights while forgetting about our own collective and individual responsibility – which leads me to the second element we need to consider.

It has to do with our lifestyle and it is not mentioned in the discourse of productivism. The daily consumption of meat raises a major problem of justice, because it cannot be universalized. It would take several planets to feed everyone in the world with as much meat as we eat here. To eat meat daily it is to accept that most of the grain we produce is used to feed livestock. It is to participate in the degradation of the environment, without thinking about future generations or the migratory patterns that will exacerbate geopolitical tensions. To eat meat daily is an injustice towards poor countries, towards future generations, and towards animals – which must be raised in intensive confinement, that is to say, in conditions that are inconsistent with the basic needs of their species – to meet this demand. We must eat, but we can eat for better or worse.

World hunger indicts not only an unjust economy order that thinks that the food trade can be liberalized in the same way we that the trade in cell phones has been liberalized and confuses different types of goods. It indicts a humanity that has lost the sense of taste and forgotten that hedonism can be something other than indecency. A phenomenology of eating, which takes the materiality of our existence seriously, the fact that we «live off « of physical and social or spiritual food, invites us to establish the rights and responsibilities of man on a completely different basis from the one that supports current political theories, the social contract, or international relations.