

## **The Moral Economy of Hunger<sup>1</sup>: Lessons from the US and the Sahel**

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*An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.*

Plutarch (c. 45-125 A.D.)

The 2008 food riots in 37 countries around the world, with recurrence in some countries in 2011, and the “Arab Spring” that began in early 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East can be cited as contemporary examples of the relationship of human rights to peace. More obvious is the case of the Sahel. Of its 50 million inhabitants, 18 million are food insecure. The consequences of the demise of the Gadhafi regime made a dire situation worse: 43,000 people fled from Libya to Chad between May and July, 2011, with money transfers decreasing by 57 percent; 260,000 workers returned to Niger; an estimated 200,000 Tuaregs from Niger and Mali returned home; a chronic food insecurity aggravated by 25 percent cereal deficit at the end of 2011 compared to 2010, and weapons from Gadhafi’s arsenal spread across borders throughout the Sahel.<sup>2</sup> The region has become a vortex of drug and human trafficking, money laundering, corruption, terrorism, kidnapping, Jihadi activities, and foreign military intervention amidst the inability of low capacity governments to exercise full control over their sovereign territories. Human rights violations in the Sahel include food insecurity from Niger to Somalia in addition to other conflict-related violations in Mali, as reported by Amnesty International,<sup>3</sup> and coexist along with the evils listed above.

In the US, the cuts in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP aka Food Stamps) beginning November 1, 2013 calls attention to the issue of food security in the country. A prolonged “cold war” between the different branches of the government, particularly between congressional Democrats and Republicans, was punctuated by a 16-day partial government shutdown (October 1-16, 2013) that ended in a negotiated “cease-fire.” At the center of the disagreement was, and remains, the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare. In the heat of the debate, the need for ensuring access to food for the many that are food insecure lost priority. That such events, despite hardship caused to hundreds of thousands of people, were not accompanied by wide spread protests or violence, raises a couple of questions. Are assumptions linking human rights to peace correct? Which lessons can be learned from the US experience?

Like any other country in the world, the US is far from being immune from the issue of endemic hunger. It too experiences, to use the classification of Jean Ziegler in *Destruction Massive: Géopolitique de la Faim* (2011), structural hunger (*faim structurelle*) and cyclical hunger (*faim conjoncturelle*).

With regard to structural hunger in Utica, New York, for example, one quarter of its 60,000+ residents lives under the poverty line. The number of students in its school district who qualify

for subsidized meals is so overwhelming that a free lunch is provided to all pupils in the district. Half way through the Great Recession (2008-2010), *Hunger & Hope* (Fall 2009), a local publication of Central New York (CNY), offered the following picture. In the larger area of CNY where Utica is located, 8 percent of seniors and 41 percent of children are food insecure. More than half of the people falling into those groups have a family member who works, but more than half of those also earn less than \$10,000 a year for the entire household. It is not just the uneducated poor who are affected: 62 percent of hungry adults have a high school or college degree. Nationally, the USDA reported in 2007 that 36.2 million Americans lived in food insecure households. Of that number 23.8 million were adults and 12 million were children.<sup>4</sup> Access to food reflects social inequality. A 2010 publication by the Levy Economics Institute of Bard College shows that the top 1 percent of Americans controlled 43 percent of the country financial wealth and the bottom 80 percent of the population were left with 7 percent of the financial wealth.<sup>5</sup> Access to food is not getting easier. Statistics show that 49 million Americans lived in food insecure households in 2012, 33.1 million of them adults and 15.9 million children.<sup>6</sup>

Studies by John Zogby dealt with cyclical hunger caused, not by nature-made disaster, but by economic downturn. Zogby polled about economic changes in the early 1990s. Factory jobs were being shipped abroad. This was an economic area with high concentration of white males. People affected moved from job to job. The next job paid less than the previous one and so on. Meanwhile, those caught in the economic downturn were stuck in their previous life styles: credit card debt to pay; mortgages to pay on expensive houses; and installments to pay on late model cars. The only flexible item in the budget was food. As a result, according to pollster Zogby, there were people earning between \$50,000 and \$80,000 a year going hungry, hunger being defined as not having a regular meal within 24 hours. The ordinary poor were already in crisis prior to the crisis among high earning members of the middle class. It was the “new” poor who were likely to change their political attitudes out of anger. Later on, this shift in political attitudes was described as the phenomenon of the “Angry White Male.” A similar situation occurred again during the “Great Recession,” 2008-2010, with a difference this time: the expression of collective anger channeled toward the Tea Party and, for (primarily) younger people unable to find work, in 2011, to the Occupy Movement.

Such political movements are far from gaining the magnitude of the “Arab Spring” or resulting in the political turmoil one can observe in the Sahel today. Mitigating factors explain the relative social quiescence in the US: a multi-faceted social safety net including government programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and private initiatives such as religious and other humanitarian NGOs’ charities.

The end of the US government shutdown was negotiated through established mechanisms and procedures for dispute resolution, a process fundamentally different from conflict resolution as it occurs within established norms and procedures. In many Sahel

countries, by contrast, efforts to negotiate differences frequently take place outside of or in the absence of established norms and mechanisms. Conflict, then, tends to become intractable and its resolution requires greater creativity and/or innovation (if not improvisation), thus requiring more time. In the absence of perceived and effective mitigating measures to address living conditions as in the Sahel countries, and as vertical political structures (electoral systems) and horizontal political structures (checks and balances among government branches) are weak, other forms of solidarity solidify, including ethnic and religious ones.

Nor can the type of conflict in the Sahel be resolved by military force. Since the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the US has been building up its military presence in the Sahel to counter terrorism. If, after more than a decade of military build-up, Jihadi extremists have demonstrated increased presence in the region, this is not case of successful use of military force. Local governments, in order to create social quiescence and political stability, should, in bridging personal responsibility vis-à-vis one's own wellbeing and collective obligation to help the weakest, meet the requirements of moral economy. In tackling the challenges of living conditions, particularly food insecurity, they should promote deliberative democracy, strengthen procedures for dispute resolution, devise new mechanisms for conflict resolution through social dialog, and create space for indigenous ways of dispute resolution that would resonate with traditional morality.

As Josué de Castro argued in *The Geopolitics of Hunger* (1977), hunger is a man-made condition. Therefore, its solution can and should also be man-made because food insecurity is embedded in power relationships and, ultimately, in the absence of democratic processes in national policy making.<sup>7</sup> If the vision of de Castro is adopted then, a moral economy can be built by reconciling personal responsibility (*oikos*) and social solidarity (*polis*).

As policy makers in the US are lowering the social safety net, they should learn from the past. And as governments in the Sahel have difficulties handling political and social conflict, they should focus on the needs of their people if they want to build a sustainable future. What Christopher Lasch called *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995) is not inevitable and the Gavroche phenomenon in *Les Misérables* (1862) of Victor Hugo is not a fatality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “moral economy” is an oxymoron. The Greek origin of the word economy, *oikonomos*, juxtaposes *oikos* (household or, by extension, family) and *nomos* (rule or natural law). Therefore, *oikos* is what is private while *polis* (city) (hence the word “politics”) is what is publicly shared. The Latin word *moralis* describes the proper behavior in a society. Thus, “moral economy” as used here places the phenomenon of hunger at the intersection of the private and the public. It links normative family behavior and *social* solidarity, *societas* meaning community or a union for common purpose. Hence, morality requires both personal responsibility vis-à-vis one's own wellbeing and social obligation to help the weakest among us. It is in this sense that, as Plutarch of Chaeronea warned, imbalance

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between rich and poor *is* an ailment that destroys the fabric of a republic. Access to food is a measure of the gap separating the haves and have-nots. Using hunger as a proxy for the ailment mentioned in Plutarch's quotation, it makes sense to compare its political consequences in a developed country such as the United and in underdeveloped countries such as those in the Sahel.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Aida Ammour, "The Sahara and Sahel after Gadhafi," *Notes Internationals* 44, CIDOB, January 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, "Serious human rights abuses pervade in Mali five months after French interventions," June 7, 2013; "Mali: mutinous soldiers captured killed in purge," October 23, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> "Hunger is an issue in CNY," *Hunger & Hope*, Fall 2009, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> E. N. Wolff, "Recent trends in household wealth in the United States: Rising debt and the middle class squeeze –an update to 2007," Working Paper N. 589, The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Hunger & Poverty Statistics. Retrieved on November 6, 2013, from

<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/hunger-and-poverty-statistics.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Josué de Castro, *The geopolitics of hunger*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Debra Richardson, Program Director for Leaf, Loaf & Ladle at RCIL, Utica, NY. Her ideas greatly contributed to my project of which this paper is a synopsis. The quotation from Plutarch and the study of the Levy Economics Institute of Bard College are borrowed from her presentation at the Fifth Annual Poverty Symposium in Utica, NY on November 1, 2013.