The unequal dead:  
catastrophe and the historical reproduction of inequality

One-day Workshop: 7th March, 2014

Centre for History and Economics  
Magdalene College, Cambridge  
AHRC Research Network on Inequality, Social Science & History  
http://www.histecon.magd.cam.ac.uk/inequality/index.html

Organisers: Patrick Joyce (Edinburgh and Manchester) and Pedro Ramos Pinto (Cambridge)

Limited places available. To attend the workshop, please email histineq@hermes.cam.ac.uk

Workshop background:

Continuing on the theme of exploring how contemporary inequalities are shaped by past events, experiences and institutions, the next workshop in our series explores how past want and suffering are unequally etched into societies.

We will depart from the connection between famine and “catastrophe”. We start from this term because we want to set famine beside other major human disasters, including the history and politics of “genocide” and of ecological disaster. We are also interested in the recent politics of disaster and famine and the new forms of humanitarian reason that have emerged. These questions enable us to consider the impact of climactic historical conjunctions of different sorts on the long-term production and reproduction of inequalities. How are old inequalities reshaped and new ones initiated, and how do consequences get into the bloodstream of history?

But, whose inequalities do we speak of? We wish to include the dead as well as the living. What is the history of their absence from history? What tracks did history not take because of their absence? What is the history, if there can be such, of the deaths of all these dead, and of the great historical silences that often followed? So we are concerned with psychic inequalities as well as material wants, and with the integral connections between the two. Our concern therefore is with the hidden injuries of inequality indeed, including the injured dead. These issues raise questions to do with the role of academic History in the work of remembering, commemorating, and historicising mass suffering and inequality, and so inevitably take us into the matter of the politics and morality of history writing.
Programme

10.00 Opening Remarks – Patrick Joyce, University of Edinburgh

10.15 – 11.30 Session 1: The Unequal Dead: Remembering and Forgetting

Making a History of the Homeplace: The Famine and Memory in West Donegal
Breandán Mac Suibhne, Centenary College, New Jersey

The Life and Death of Martin Collins: A Tale of Famine Ireland
Enda Delaney, University of Edinburgh

11.30 – 11.45 – Coffee Break

11.45 – 1.00 Session 2. Articulating catastrophe

Trauma and Inequality
Niall Ó Ciosáin, NUI Galway

Connolly the cannibal: horror, empathy and famine
Cormac Ó Gráda, University College, Dublin

1.00 – 1.45 Lunch

1.45 – 3.00 Session 3. The morality of structural violence

Clearing the Ghàidhealtachd, Clearing the Landlords.
Donald Bloxham, University of Edinburgh

Re-evaluating the structural violence in Britain's rise to hegemony through the prism of the 'Anthropocene'
Mark Levene, Southampton University

3.00 – 3.15 Coffee Break

3.15 – 4.30 Session 4. Beyond Ireland: the politics of catastrophe

David Nally, University of Cambridge

Humanitarian Technologies After Decolonization
Tehila Sasson, University of California, Berkeley

4.30 – 5.30 Closing Discussion
ABSTRACTS

Session 1: The Unequal Dead: Remembering and Forgetting

Making a History of the Homeplace: The Famine and Memory in West Donegal
Breandán Mac Suibhne,
Centenary College, New Jersey

OWEN: ... a man long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’
beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish
remembers.
YOLLAND: Except you.
OWEN: I’ve left here.
YOLLAND: You remember it.

Brian Friel, Translations (1980), II.i

In the item in last weeks [sic] issue congratulation [sic] Fiona Ní Ghallchóir,
Ranamona, on success in the Ulster Dancing Championships, it was stated due
to a typographical error[,] that a relative of her father Con was a rate collector
in Gweedore 150 years ago.

This is incorrect and we are sorry for any inconvenience caused.

Donegal Democrat, 21 November 1996

‘Outrage’, as contributors likely know, was an official category in nineteenth-century
Ireland, embracing much popular political activity, the arc extending from the posting of
‘threatening notices’ to holding demonstrations to attacks on persons and property. I am
currently completing a project on a Famine-raised wave of ‘outrage’ in West Donegal, its
origins and outcomes, the meaning and the memory of it. More specifically, that project
concerns the end of ‘outrage’, that is, the shifting objectives of those who engaged in it,
and also how, after hunger faded and disease abated, tensions emerged in a clandestine
political movement, the Ribbon Society, when one element sought to curtail such activity,
while another sought, unsuccessfully, to expand it. And in that contention, when the
opportunities of post-Famine society were coming into view, one glimpses the end, or at
least an ebbing, of outrage—in the everyday sense of moral indignation—at the fate of the
rural poor. At heart, however, the project is about contention among neighbours—one
who rose from the ashes of a mode of living, those consumed in the conflagration, and
those who lost much but not all. Central to it is a story of a schoolmaster turning informer
in 1856, and naming over two dozen men as members of the Ribbon Society. The master
claimed to be informing to protect a tenant, who had been threatened by Ribbonmen. I
probe that claim, and also the sources of the animosity towards the tenant, a man better
off than his neighbours, but by no means wealthy. Chief among those sources of animosity
was the man being considered a ‘land grabber’, that is, he had repeatedly acquired land to
which he was not necessarily considered morally entitled—first, in the early 1840s, in a
landlord-initiated movement from a communal open field system of land use to one of
squared farms; and, then, during and immediately after the Great Famine, when he
obtained a complete holding from one family and substantial sections of two other
holdings from families in straitened circumstances. This micro-history is complicated by
the historian being a descendant of two families—in a townland of eight families—whose
land was acquired by the offending tenant, and his family and ‘grabber’s’ descendants still
living in the small place. For the purposes of this workshop, both the subject of that micro-
history—which I happy to circulate in early 2014—and some problems associated with its
production provide a specific focus for a discussion of the issues raised by Patrick Joyce,
that is, catastrophe and the long-term production and reproduction of inequality, and,
finally, the inequality of the dead in history. Here, however, it is the inequality of the dead
in seanchas [oral history] as distinct from print history that is the main concern. What was
remembered, and for how long? And what was soonest forgotten, and why? Besides the
specific local case, Famine-related oral histories from a wider district will be discussed

The Life and Death of Martin Collins: A Tale of Famine Ireland
Enda Delaney, University of Edinburgh

In late 1850 Martin Collins, aged 50, a native of Killadyseert in east Clare, died of hunger
and exposure. He was fatally weakened by severe malnutrition and pleaded with the local
poor law official for food, and was granted some meal. By the time he got to the store, all
the meal was gone. An old woman, the Widow Ryan, found him lying alongside the road,
and sent for the priest to give him the last rites. The unnamed priest gave her money to
buy some food. She did so, but it was too late. Collins died on the floor of her cabin.
We know about the suffering of Collins because the notes of the inquest were made public
by the aristocratic philanthropist and clergyman, Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne, who
published the details of the case in the Times. The background was fairly typical for a
death in the later years of the famine. Evicted from his home during the brutal clearances
of small-holders, he sought help from a poor law guardian named Linnane, who
recommended that he be a given a ticket for meal by the local relieving officer, which he
duly was. It was his misfortune that there was simply no meal available. Collins was
buried the next day in a famine pit ‘shroudless, coffinless, the body merely rolled up in
straw’. This was the final act of humiliation.
‘You can read page after page about the Famine and never come across the name of
anyone who died or anything about them’, observed the writer Colm Toibín. Collins and a
handful of others are among the few that have survived what Toibín terms the ‘erasures’ of
history. Almost every major city in which the Irish settled has a famine memorial –
Glasgow being the exception but one is planned – yet there are no rolls of names or lists of people. This paper explores in a speculative way the non-histories of the Irish Famine dead, why they have been ‘erased’ and the inequalities they faced that caused their deaths in the first place, and the inequalities that have persisted that have ensured they rarely feature in the historical writing.

Session 2. Articulating catastrophe

Trauma and inequality
Niall O’Ciosain, NUI Galway

Since its 150th anniversary in the mid-1990s, there has been a great deal of writing, both academic and non-academic, on the Great Famine. One of the paradigms most noticeable in this literature has been the presentation of the Famine in psychoanalytic terms as a trauma, with the commemoration and analysis forming part of the recovery from that trauma, following an initial suppression of the trauma. This paper explores the implications of adopting a framework that was initially developed to describe an individual’s experience in order to explain a social phenomenon.

1) Does the individual model make sense? It is ironic (though typical of interdisciplinary dynamics) that the model of trauma was adopted by historians and others in the 1990s just as it was coming under sustained attack among writers on psychoanalysis.

2) Does it describe events since the 1840s accurately? Was there, as is often suggested, a suppression of the memory of the Famine?

3) To what collectivity is the model being applied? The entire population of the island and its descendants? The population of the regions worst affected? The poor of the entire island?

4) Can a model derived from individual psychodynamics be applied to large groups? Are there collective consciousnesses and do they behave like individual ones?

And finally, what are the implications of the adoption of such models, premised as they are on similarities and equalities within groups, for the understanding of the historical experience of inequality?
Connolly the cannibal: horror, empathy and famine
Cormac O'Grada, University College, Dublin

According to geographer Jared Diamond, ‘Westerners abhor cannibalism’. Stories and rumors about cannibalism during famines in the former Soviet Union in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, in China in the 1950s, and in North Korea in the 1990s might seem to lend credence to Diamond’s claim. However, in the past famine cannibalism was by no means restricted to such places: the threat of starvation also sometimes drove people to cannibalism in North America and in Europe. Ireland was not immune. Moreover, the understanding and even empathy shown towards those who engaged in the practice does not square so readily with Diamond’s rather condescending generalization. My presentation will review some of the historical evidence for famine cannibalism. It will describe how survivor cannibalism was used in the past to elicit sympathy rather than condemnation. Finally it will touch on possible cultural dimensions to the strength of taboos even in extreme circumstances.

Session 3. The morality of structural violence

Clearing the Ghàidhealtachd, Clearing the Landlords.
Donald Bloxham, University of Edinburgh

My paper will address the moral dimensions of the historiography around the highland clearances, drawing some comparisons with the historiography of the great Irish famine. One of the more obvious cleavages in the historiography separates those who on one hand use highlander sources and - by an extension that is not necessary but is commonplace - adopt highlander perspectives of the “experience” of the clearances, and those who on the other hand use landlord sources and/or the approaches of economic history in their attempt to explain the “causes” of the clearances. To generalise terribly, the former group of historians may see the latter as heartless and in some way siding with the forces and agents of eviction; the latter see the former as overly emotive and insufficiently 'realistic' as to the power (indeed perhaps the inevitability) of the economic winds. Each side sees the other's approach as wrong about the ethics of historical inquiry as that inquiry relates to morally-laden content, and each side has some more or less explicit prescription for what history should do. Is there anything more to be said by the historiographer than simply recording these differences? I hope so and will endeavour to outline my thoughts.
Re-evaluating the structural violence in Britain's rise to hegemony through the prism of the 'Anthropocene'
Mark Levene, Southampton University

This contribution will seek to bring into this historically-based discussion a recent concept as developed from the earth sciences. Through the prism of the Anthropocene Britain's radical 18th century acceleration towards a brave new modern world, might be seen as the seminal moment on the road to contemporary biospheric catastrophe. Here, we will chart the structural violence implicit in that departure, as it impacted on the one hand on the English, Irish and Scottish peasantry, the indigenes of the antipodes and Americas, on the other. An aspect of the consequent 'inequalities' to be explored will be how the former were used and abused in the destruction of the latter. And thus, how the scene was set for globalising processes of disenfranchisement and disempowerment yet with hierarchical value in the stakes of social and environmental degradation.

Session 4. Beyond Ireland: the politics of catastrophe

Between need and opportunity': The Rockefeller Foundation, Food Security, and the Governance of the Foreseeable Future.
David Nally, University of Cambridge

‘Food security’ is a constant feature of public discourse today. Journalists, social scientists, charitable organisations, governments, philanthropic foundations, NGOs, agribusinesses, food industries and plant scientists all employ the concept to justify and give sense to their activities. Despite the concept's political currency remarkably little research has been devoted to unpacking the various meanings and policy prescription enrolled in the term. The impression left is that ‘food security’ is an ideologically neutral concept, an idea accepted everywhere and without controversy; in other words, it is a ‘global good’ to be strived for.

By contrast this paper examines ‘food security’ as an epistemological object. It suggests that the idea of securing food is profoundly related to the problem of socially managing hunger and relatedly, the problem of directing rural modernization. One can trace these concerns to the mid-nineteenth century – indeed elsewhere I have argued that the Irish Famine was, from a governmental perspective, less a problem of addressing the food basket and caloric minima (Nally 2011) and more about ensuring that state practices, including famine relief measures, encouraged proletarianization and agrarian development. However by the close of the Second World War population pressures, rural
immiseration, and the advancement of communism on the world stage propelled a new ‘humanitarian’ endeavour to bring Western ‘scientific agriculture’ to the poor of the planet.

The paper will focus on the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation. The Rockefeller Foundation was instrumental in pushing the implementation of a suite of scientific and technological approaches to agricultural later given known as the ‘Green Revolution’. This paper will trace three concerns that emerge from the Foundation’s work and arguably give the term ‘food security’ its contemporary valence. Those concerns were – and to a large degree still are – directed toward the engineering of agrarian natures, the regulation of population growth, and the adjustment of risky behaviours. I argue that the pathway to modernity outlined by the Rockefeller Foundation hinged on the organisation of science and resources to counter common threats and achieve particular social goals. According to this logic hunger was no longer ‘beyond the government of man’ (Vernon 2007). It could be tackled through an applied philanthropy that stressed the laboratory, the communal village, and the marketplace as the key sites of innovation.

The overall aim of the paper is to show how contemporary frameworks for intervening in the lives of others – in this case through the optic of ‘food security’ – rest upon, and are validated by, historically constituted patterns of thought.

Humanitarian Technologies After Decolonization
Tehila Sasson, University of California, Berkeley

From Biafra in 1968, to Ethiopia in 1985, humanitarian interventions defined postcolonial plights in Africa as ‘famines’. Through this definition, British aid was legitimized and administrated. This paper examines the framework of famines as a way to understand the development of British humanitarian technologies after decolonization. I look at both state and non-state aid to explore the relationship between Britain and postcolonial Africa. I am interested in exploring how the forms of expertise about famines were developed – both through camps and airlifts in Africa as well as through concerts such as Live Aid in Britain – and how these modes of expertise were built upon imperial knowledge. Through the category of ‘famines’, a new humanitarian reason was developed, one which focused on a more ethical (rather than political) type of aid and aimed at sustaining the bare lives of individuals.