Hunger, the Social, and States of Welfare in Modern Imperial Britain

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I'LL BEGIN AT THE END OF MY STORY. In a wonderfully imaginative reading of Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman,* Bruce Robbins begins this volume by deftly capturing the way in which Steedman structures the portrait of her mother around two defining and contradictory experiences of Britain's new welfare state in the 1950s. The book starts with Steedman recalling how, after the birth of her little sister, she bore witness to a health visitor condemning her mother for the poor conditions of the house in which she was raising her children. It is, thus, a representative of the welfare state charged to care for her family who first marks Steedman's life with the silent injuries of class; Steedman vows to "do everything and anything until the end of my days to stop anyone ever talking to me like that woman talked to my mother." And yet, as the book draws to a close, hurt gives way to gratitude for the welfare state's "entirely beneficent" intervention in her life: "I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something."[1] Like Robbins, I am interested in how we can reconcile these two conflicting responses to the welfare state and how we must do justice to the force of them both if we are to be able to re-

[1] Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 2, 122.

imagine a politics of social welfare. For Robbins, the solution is to insist that ultimately we have to make a simple ethical choice for or against the state, and he follows what he imagines to be Steedman's logic by arguing that hurt gives way to gratitude; the injuries of intervention are overcome by the benefits. Having opened up the complexity of states of welfare and our affective relationships to them, he promptly closes it down by confronting us with the same false and unnecessary choice that neoliberals have presented on both sides of the Atlantic. Robbins's ethical injunction cannot explain why many who have benefited from the welfare state have embraced the neoliberal critique of it. We need better history, not just better ethics, to recuperate and reimagine the politics of welfare.

One way of rethinking the politics of welfare and its forms of statecraft is to historicize the social they addressed and tried to secure. For a historian like myself, whose work on Britain's peculiar modernity has addressed the constitution of the liberal political subject and its reconfiguration as the subject of social democracy, this is obviously a predictable, if hopefully a generative, move to make. We have many histories of the welfare state but not of the social that it made democratic. What then is this clumsy little noun, the "social," and how might we approach historicizing it? It was a project first begun by Polanyi, Arendt, and Foucault, who all suggested that, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the way in which the world was understood and acted upon was reimagined as a series of ontologically discrete spheres or domains—namely, economy, society, and politics—each with their own separate patterns, regularities, and norms.[2] The social was left as the domain that addressed what contemporaries increasingly referred to as "the social question"—phenomena such as poverty, crime, and disease, which were seen as neither economic nor political in origin or character, but which were thought to similarly transcend the control of individuals and yet shape the condition of their lives.

As the questions raised by the social were now thought to be quite separate from those of an economic or political character, they required the attention of new types of experts capable of developing novel investigative techniques that would shed light on, and offer practical solutions to, what was fast becoming seen as a set of intractable social problems.[3] Gradually, during the mid-nineteenth century, their investigations into these phenomena gave the social a life of its own as a thing called "society": no longer just a series of unrelated questions referring to particularly problematic groups of the population, the social became viewed as a totality, a system, with its own logics (later theorized as laws) waiting to be discovered and acted upon in the name of social progress. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the individual was seen as an irreducible social being, and society was viewed as the vital connective tissue between the economy and politics that ensured the stability of both domains—a fact recognized in Britain as the state slowly took responsibility for securing this domain between the introduction of a system of social insurance in 1911 and the construction of the welfare state after the Beveridge Report of 1942.[4]

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[2] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944; Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963); Michel Foucault, "On Governmentality," *Ideology and Consciousness* 6 (Autumn 1979): 5–22. For a useful comparison, see Claire Edwards, "Cutting Off the King's Head: The 'Social' in Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (June 1999): 3–20.

[3] Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[4] This history is suggestively, if schematically, sketched in Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

By the 1980s, however, the curious pair of Margaret Thatcher and Jean Baudrillard proclaimed the death of the social. While neoliberals like Thatcher proclaimed that there was no such thing as society, that nothing except the family should come between the individual and the market, social theorists also suggested that the social, as traditionally understood in its classic modern form, as systemic and territorially bounded by nation-states, no longer existed in the West. Some followed Polanyi, Arendt, and Foucault and insisted that this version of the social, as an ontological invention of the modern human sciences, had never been real.[5] Others argued that sociologists had not forged their discipline by studying a fiction and pointed to the ways in which the myriad forces of globalized late capitalism and information technology had led to the social's disaggregation as a system and its reinvention in more mobile, transitory, and "liquid" forms of sociality.[6] It is the largely unexamined historical gap between the formative histories of the social and the recent theorizations of its death that I want to explore in my attempt to understand Steedman's contradictory responses to the welfare state. I shall do so by focusing on the cultural history of a key target of social welfare, addressed by the school meals Steedman gratefully received—hunger.[7]

Clearly, hunger is as old as history itself, but my contention is that, far from being a timeless and unchanging material condition, the meaning of hunger, and therefore the systems used to govern it, underwent a dramatic series of transformations in imperial Britain between the late eighteenth and the mid-twentieth century. Broadly speaking, although it was the classical political economy of Smith and Malthus that first established hunger as an avoidable, man-made phenomenon rather than solely the product of nature or providence, it removed the government of hunger from the business of the state. The market, they claimed, must be kept free to generate either plenty or hunger, and soon, following the political reaction to the French Revolution, neo-Malthusians came to blame the continuing presence of the latter on the laziness and moral weakness of the hungry.[8] Characterized as lacking the appropriate moral qualities of liberal selfhood, the hungry were identified as a social problem that required targeted disciplinary attention—classically through the draconian operations of the New Poor Law in 1834, which infamously used hunger to teach the virtuous necessity of labor. Thereafter, the problem of hunger lay at the heart of the dilemmas of British liberalism; it helped determine where the boundaries were drawn between the market and the state, the subject and the citizen, the individual and the collective, the nation and the empire.

Between the 1840s and the First World War, the neo-Malthusian view of hunger was challenged, as a series of humanitarian crusades and political protests across the British Empire suggested that far from having failed to learn the market's disciplines, the hungry were victims of its

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[5] Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

[6] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). For useful discussions of these developments in social theory, see Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002); Nicholas Gane, ed., *The Future of Social Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

[7] For other histories of the social, see Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); George Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); David Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[8] Gareth Stedman Jones, *The End of Poverty? A Historical Debate* (London: Profile Books, 2004).

systemic failure. The hungry first became objects of humanitarian sympathy in the wake of the New Poor Law and a series of famines in Ireland and India when the press made their suffering newsworthy by representing them as innocent victims of broader political and economic crises. Critical here was the development of new techniques of news reporting—the eyewitness report, the individuation of suffering, the focus on women and children, the use of graphic or photographic images—that allowed journalists to connect the humanitarian subject with the distant suffering of hungry strangers. This humanitarian discovery of hunger made it possible for Irish and Indian nationalists, as well as suffragettes and movements of the unemployed in Britain, to mobilize hunger as a vehicle of political protest and a measure of misrule. A variety of tactics—critiques of colonial famines, hunger strikes, and hunger marches—served to indict the inadequacy and injustice of not just the market economy that left many hungry but the illiberal, violent, and unrepresentative nature of the metropolitan and colonial states that claimed to govern on their behalf. The heroic endurance of hunger in the face of these systemic failures formed a critical basis for the claim to citizenship and independence by subjects of Britain and its colonies. Yet this use of hunger as a measure of the failure of British liberalism at home and abroad to protect its subjects from famine and hunger also laid the foundations for a future social mode of governing hunger once it was recognized that independence or the vote was not enough.

However, it was the emergence of the social and nutritional sciences in the late nineteenth century that made it possible to translate this political will into imagining new mechanisms for managing hunger socially, both within and beyond the state form. Using the new science of nutrition, social investigators were able for the first time to define hunger and measure its scale and social costs with some precision. In doing so they "discovered" it to be a pressing social problem that demanded new forms of government to secure the hungry from the systemic failures of liberal politics and economics. Critical here was the development of a set of seemingly objective and transferable investigative techniques, processes, and equipment—from inquiry cards to calorimeters and nutritional laboratories—that provided universal measures and standards allowing comparisons across time and space. If some of hunger's sharper valences were lost in measuring hunger scientifically rather than on a calculus of human sympathy or political outrage, these techniques for identifying it and measuring how much food the hungry required to restore their health and productivity made it possible for the state to develop, calibrate, and enact new forms of welfare. Despite the professed neutrality and objectivity of their expert knowledge, social and nutritional scientists did not passively translate a new social ethic toward hunger into practical schemes for its government. Instead, their work often generated new conceptions of the social itself. After the First World War, for instance, the discovery of vitamins and deficiency diseases in the colonial laboratories of South Asia and East Africa redefined hunger as malnutrition and shifted attention to maximizing the quality of the diet and health of all through nutritional planning rather than simply ensuring that some received the basic minimum quantity of food.

This recognition not only opens up the relationship between metropolitan and colonial histories of the social and their states of welfare but pushes them farther into a broader transnational frame. Many of the British nutritionists responsible for the colonial discovery of malnutrition that redefined metropolitan hunger subsequently played leading roles in the "hungry England" debates of the 1930s, through which the inadequacy of welfare for the mass ranks of unemployed was revealed. They were also central to the development of new international nutritional programs and standards through the League of Nations and the United Nations, as well as to the framing of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. John "Popeye" Boyd Orr's ca-

reer was characteristic. He began testing military rations during the First World War before set-ting up, with Carnegie and British government funds, Britain's first dedicated nutritional labora-tory in the 1920s at the Rowett Institute. It soon became a hub of nutritional research and training across the empire—one of its buildings had a stained-glass window representing the flags of every British dominion and colony—and Orr's research and consultancy work took him across the globe. In the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s he published the most fa-mous and scathing exposure of the social costs of malnutrition in Britain (claiming that over 50 percent of the population had an inadequate diet) and ensured that the Colonial Office collected similar information about British colonies, which contributed directly to the new linking of wel-fare and development in the 1940 act. Having spent the war arguing that it was possible for the world to govern hunger socially by way of nutritional planning that elevated need over profit through the creation of a World Food Bank, he became the first director general of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1943 and a recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1949. The point is not just that understandings of hunger in Britain were partly a colonial and transnational formation but that they helped generate a new cosmopolitan vision of the social and its welfare. It is worth emphasizing that many of the world's most prominent nongovern-mental organizations—like Save the Children and Oxfam—were formed in the battle against world hunger at this time and, like a plethora of other famine relief agencies, were instrumental in establishing new grammars for the management of hunger.

If in Britain the social had emerged as an attempted solution to the dilemmas hunger posed for liberalism, justifying punitive and targeted governmental interventions upon the hungry as moral failures, the gradual transformation in the meanings of hunger at the hands of humanitari-ans, political activists, and social and nutritional scientists generated a more democratic view of the social that generalized the government of hunger as the responsibility of all society. This was a trajectory that was reflected in the development of many of the new forms of social welfare with which hunger was increasingly managed. The mechanics of collective feeding, for instance, were developed in institutions like the prison and workhouse, where the liberal state first took responsibility for the welfare of those it sought to discipline and punish, before these techniques were eventually made a central tool of the welfare state to feed schoolchildren, industrial work-ers, and the community more broadly. Never just a mechanism for the social provision of food to the needy, canteens worked to instill object lessons in the civility of society and inscribe new practices of sociality and dietary regimes. New forms of technical expertise (from architects, in-dustrial designers, educationalists, and domestic scientists) were endlessly enlisted to literally engineer a vision of the good society into the design and material culture of the canteen—an of-ten thankless task of battling against recalcitrant materials and humans. The new social forms of governing hunger, then, remained implicated in the disciplinary strategies of the liberal forms they supposedly displaced. With respect to school meals I have traced this in several ways: through the voluntary nature of their initial provision and the patchy and compromised manner of their delivery after 1944, the state's continued use of the means test to distinguish who needs a free lunch and who has to pay, and the always failing attempts to feed children healthy foods and improve their manners.

Neither did the old liberal reification of individual responsibility and market mechanisms disappear. Alongside the development of new welfare programs there was a proliferation of schemes to educate the consumer as citizen in the social ethics of efficient and nutritious con-sumption, the subtext of which was that hunger was in part the fault of inefficient and wasteful

housewives. Here again the newly expanded conception of the social is evident because, although initially such schemes were targeted at the inefficiencies of the households of the poor, they were soon generalized to address the population as a whole. This was clearly a heavily gendered project, for it identified the housewife as the key vehicle for improving the dietary health of society through the family and sought to train her in the new techniques of domestic science. The skills of planning and balancing budgets and diets, of efficient household economy, which nutritional and social scientists elevated to a domestic science between the wars, had made significant headway by the 1950s. The state clearly played a role here: the teaching of cookery and domestic science became increasingly central to girls' education beginning in the late nineteenth century, while the Ministry of Food played a central role in disseminating its techniques further during both world wars. Yet, more interestingly and more effectively, these new forms of socially responsible household and dietary management were also commercialized and internalized as a new dietary ethic of self-management through the marketing of ideal homes, efficient kitchens, and healthy lifestyles between the wars. It bears repeating that the attempt to manage hunger "socially" was not confined to what became known or caricatured as the welfare state; it also rested upon a surprisingly resilient conception of the moral duties of the individual, duties that were increasingly projected upon the commercial domain, where the citizen as consumer was expected to oversee the nutritional health of herself and her family.

This should alert us to just how precarious the achievement of democratizing the social and the welfare state was in Britain. Its foundational text, the Beveridge Report of 1942, identified the five giant evils the welfare state would defeat in terms that would not have been out of place a century earlier—Want, Squalor, Ignorance, Idleness, and Disease—all implying that their victims were not entirely free of responsibility for suffering them. Of course, advocates of the system of welfare Beveridge imagined did indeed quickly translate its purpose in more positive terms as the defeat of Poverty and the promotion of Housing, Education, Work, and Health. Yet the Beveridge Report remained caught between a conception of welfare as a necessary social right that protected the innocent from systemic failures beyond their control and a form of disciplinary care for those who had failed to protect themselves from these misfortunes: in many ways it represented, as Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, "the last and most glorious flowering of late Victorian philanthropy."[9]

Nevertheless, that the welfare state was possible at all was due to not only the myriad scientists, technicians, and engineers of the social I have alluded to but also those in political movements. The social may not have initially been the product of a particular politics, but it did become the object of political mobilization. I am thinking less of the way in which during the final decades of the nineteenth century all political parties increasingly claimed to speak in the name of the social, as targeted and often disciplinary-minded social reform became a central plank of Conservative Party strategy and the articulation of a "New Liberalism." I am referring instead to the attempt to democratize the social and ensure that its forms of welfare and security were considered a universal right, not a way of punishing particular groups. In this endeavor the Labour Party was arguably less important than the protests and hunger marches of the unemployed between the wars. Despite its communist leadership the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) focused its critique not on the structural contradictions of capitalism but on the politics of welfare administration. Every hunger march was directed at some change in the

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[9] Gareth Stedman Jones, "Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?" in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 246.

administration of welfare benefits, and critically they helped ensure that those benefits were considered a right, not an excuse for further punishment or humiliation. The movement's struggle was to make social welfare part of the commons, an entitlement that was unconditional and did not have to be applied or begged for.

Ostracized by the labor movement, it was not until the rediscovery of hungry England in 1934 and the Jarrow Crusade of 1936 that the NUWM's campaign began to receive attention and support. However, it was only after the Second World War that the Labour Party truly embraced these hunger marches, as they epitomized the hunger of the thirties that the party repeatedly invoked to legitimate the construction of the welfare state. This cultural work of remembering what became known as "the hungry thirties" became disseminated to the citizenry itself, not least by historians of the Left, who, through community publishing, oral histories, and the history workshop movement, were encouraged to narrate their own accounts of how post-war social democracy had enabled them to escape from the hunger of their childhoods—this is the story of Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*. It was not accidental that part of the new Right's unraveling of social democracy was its attack on what they considered the myth of the 1930s, with Norman Tebbit, then secretary of state for employment, infamously telling how his father had got on his bike to look for work rather than become dependent upon the welfare of a nanny state.

I hope that this account of the changing ways in which hunger was understood and governed in modern imperial Britain helps us better understand Steedman's contradictory responses to the practices of welfare she encountered as a child after the welfare state had tried to democratize the social. The condescending and punitive attitude of the health visitor and the sense of affirmation and empowerment that school meals provided her with remind us how intricately related the histories of discipline and welfare are. Far from being in opposition to each other or developing sequentially, with one giving way to the other, they were mutually dependent and constitutive of each other. It took a long time for many who received welfare, even in those forms like school meals that claimed universality, not to feel a sense of shame and punishment. Reflecting upon how many continued not to take advantage of school meals after three decades of universal provision, Frank Field argued in the mid-1970s that the school meals program—with its bad food, inadequate infrastructure, and marking of those who ate for free—had failed to rid itself of the stigma of poverty and shame that stretched back to nineteenth century soup kitchens and the workhouses. Recognizing this is not to disallow the provision of welfare—although it helps us explain its vulnerability to neoliberal critique—rather, it is to call for a critical reflection upon its historical forms so that they can be renewed in the present.

I want, in conclusion, to quickly flag three other novel perspectives of the history of welfare that emerge from this account.

- First, just as states of welfare did not neatly displace discipline, neither did they eradicate the use of market mechanisms to make individuals take responsibility for their own nutritional health. Several other contributions to this volume have similarly emphasized that liberalism, like social democracy and neoliberalism, was a hybrid form that always relied upon, while extending beyond, earlier states of welfare.

- Second, questions of welfare were never conceived in national terms alone; they were also closely tied to colonial and transnational calculations and developments without ever being reducible to them.

- Third, we need to radically redistribute agency in histories of the welfare state, not just to acknowledge the cosmopolitan contributions of technical experts as much as those of local political movements, but to recognize the central importance of the material objects and infrastructures through which welfare was provided within nation-states. This material fabric had a different historical rhythm: politics, ideologies, and forms of expertise come and go, but the material environments they seek to replace or help construct endure far longer. Social theorists may now talk of the death or liquidization of the social, but we still inhabit (the increasingly shabby forms of) the material world provided by postwar social democratic welfare states, just as in Britain the new hospitals and schools of the welfare state were frequently housed in the old workhouses.

Each of these insights invites us to complicate the big-bang periodization of change that has for so long dominated our histories of the social and the welfare state as well as the spatially discrete categories of the nation, the colonial, and the global that they have relied upon.

So although hunger helped produce the crisis of liberalism, in both its domestic and its imperial forms, it did not lead to its collapse. Liberalism was instead reconfigured so that liberal and social democratic forms of governing hunger were combined within an imperial, if decolonizing, state that claimed that the welfare of the social, at home and abroad, was its primary objective. If this was the historical case, then it appears to offer some political hope. We may be better placed to understand our current tendencies to once again blame the hungry for their hunger. We may also be able to imagine that challenging these tendencies does not necessarily depend upon elaborating an essentially nineteenth-century politics that has to think and mobilize systemically. For too long we have accepted the self-legitimating claims of both social democrats and neoliberals that the welfare state was a totalizing, monolithic structure when in fact it was never entirely either statist in form or welfarist in orientation. If we cannot historically separate either forms of welfare from discipline or the market, or the state from other forms of rule, we can no longer ask ourselves whether we are for or against welfare, for or against the state. Instead, we might be able to imagine new forms of politics concerned with the democratic nature and welfare of the social that replaces systemic analyses and challenges with insurgencies against strategic targets, be they local, national, or global. A