

# A feast of Tantalus: Corporeal crisis and death by starvation in Britain 1830–1914



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## Abstract

This article argues that capitalism in general and social reproduction theory in particular must be understood through the body. Based on a study of hunger and starvation in Britain between 1830 and 1914, it maintains that the conflicting dialectics between the ‘freedom to starve’ underpinning competitive labour markets and the ‘right to live’ institutionalised by society’s attempt to offset its worst effects are key for understanding how social reproduction orders are historically established and stabilised.

## Keywords

body, death by starvation, hunger, labour, social reproduction

## Introduction

In 1905, George R. Sims wrote a series of articles entitled ‘Trips About Town’ for the *Strand Magazine* in which he described his impressions and encounters as a saunter exploring London. ‘Soho is a land of startling contrasts’, he noted. ‘Contrast is its dramatic note. There wealth and poverty look at each other across the way. There honest drudgery and vicious pleasure are next-door neighbours. There hunger gazes from morning to night on a feast of Tantalus’ (Sims 1905: 273). King Tantalus was a Greek mythological figure known for his eternal deprivation of nourishment in Tantaros, a dungeon in the underworld where the wicked – the Titans, Sisyphus and the Danaides being its most famous inmates – received divine punishment. Tantalus was made to stand in a

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pool of water that receded from him whenever he stooped to drink, and beneath fruit trees whose branches raised whenever he tried to reach the fruit. The story of Tantalus is one of unobtainable salvation, of temptation without satisfaction, of eternal deprivation amidst plenty. As we shall see, a substantial part of the British working class experienced life as a feast of Tantalus between 1830 and 1914.

Karl Polanyi (2001) famously depicted the Speenhamland Law as a moment of transition between a vacillating aristocratic morality and the constitution of a 'free' labour market premised upon people's non-negotiable market dependence. Until then, paternalism, once the nexus around which the old-landed aristocracy found its legitimacy, had offered a framework offsetting the worst effects of emerging market relations, notably by transforming the marketplace into a space of dissent where social discontent and moral outrage could be expressed, middlemen vilified, and food riots legitimised, especially in times of dearth (Bohstedt 1983, 1992; Randall & Charlesworth 1999; Thompson 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Walter 1989). The New Poor Law of 1834 sounded the death knell of this moral economy and presided over the politico-legal rooting of an expanding capitalist universe premised upon enforcing the institution of wage-labour as the sole avenue for survival. The pre-existing Speenhamland Law, Polanyi (2001) argued, 'introduced no less a social and economic innovation than the "right to live", and until abolished in 1834, it effectively prevented the establishment of a competitive labor market' (p. 82). As I shall argue, capitalism in general and social reproduction theory in particular must be understood through the body. This entails a study of the conflicting dialectics between the 'freedom to starve' underpinning wage-labour and the 'right to live' institutionalised by society's attempt to offset the worst effects of labour market dynamics.

Social reproduction theory has played a key role in expanding the social universe of labour in arguing that a political economy of labour must take into consideration both the inner dynamics of capital accumulation within the sphere of production and the ways in which this and the next generation of workers are produced and reproduced (Bezanson & Luxton 2006; Ferguson 1999; Laslett & Brenner 1989). It therefore proposes an expanded conception of the social totality as 'the general reproduction of social/material life' (Bakker & Gill 2003: 23). Social reproduction theory is thus well positioned to account for the contradiction between processes of production and social reproduction, and the historical subordination of the latter to the former (Picchio 1992). As Sue Ferguson (2017) has argued, the relationship between profit- and life-making processes is at once necessary and contradictory. It is necessary because the historical dispossession of direct producers from their means of subsistence entails that both capitalists and workers must reproduce themselves through the market, either as buyers or sellers of labour power. It is contradictory because the satisfaction of human needs is subordinated to capital accumulation. The result of this conflicting dialectics is that capital needs labour power in production at the same time that it negates conditions for its reproduction. At the core of the historical geography of capitalism thus lies an unsettling idea: the *potential* destruction of the body is fundamental to capital's logic of accumulation. Whether this potential is actualised or mediated by private and social relief institutions is a historical question that is fundamental for understanding how social reproduction orders are historically established and stabilised.

While Marxist scholarship has shown growing interest in the body (Callard 1998; Fracchia 2005; Guthman & DuPuis 2006; Harvey 1998; Orzeck 2007), very little has been written on the central importance of corporeal processes for social reproduction theory (Rioux 2015a, 2015b). In this article, I argue that the fundamental contradiction between production and social reproduction – that is, between profit- and life-making processes – is expressed first and foremost as a corporeal (and therefore generational) crisis. Through a conception of the body as a site where capitalist contradictions are displaced, I explore the social history and corporeal geography of hunger and starvation in Britain between 1830 and 1914. As I demonstrate, however, the corporeal geography of hunger and starvation must be at once a history of those who experienced the prolonged pain of an empty stomach but also include those who did not survive its morbid embrace. In this respect, a crisis of social reproduction already contains the possibility of its ‘resolution’ through the annihilation of the body. The two sections composing this article offer a social history of those who suffered from the lack of proper nourishment. I conclude by arguing that recorded deaths by starvation were only the tip of the iceberg, as hunger and starvation killed far more indirectly than directly. Peter Linebaugh (2003) has written a history by the neck. Following Mike Davis (2002), this is an attempt at writing a history by the belly.

## A Hungry Nation

When the young *Oliver Twist* first entered the shop of Mr Sowerberry, an undertaker employed by the parish, the shopkeeper’s wife immediately remarked how small he was. This ‘little bag o’bones’ embodied months of semi-starvation in the workhouse where the New Poor Law made sure that he and his emaciated companions wasted their life ‘without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing’ (Dickens 1850: 3). Charles Dickens (1850) captured in a single stroke the condition of a wealthy yet starving nation when he described Oliver’s reaction after being asked if he was not ‘too dainty to eat’ the cold bits of meat:

Oliver, whose eyes had glistened at the mention of meat, and who was trembling with eagerness to devour it, replied in the negative; and a plateful of coarse broken victuals was set before him. I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen *Oliver Twist* clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish. (pp. 19–20)

Dickens’ vitriolic critique of industrial capitalism and the trail of degradation and poverty that this intoxicating period of ‘progress’ left behind was no exaggeration. It struck at the heart of capitalism’s contradictions, skilfully capturing the morbid symptoms of a fractured society within which the ruling elite was increasingly unwilling to take responsibility for the widespread social distress created by the consolidation of the capitalist order it supported.

Contemporaries knew all too well that the physical and psychological violence perpetrated by chronic hunger and starvation was embodied in multiple ways. The weight loss, muscle wasting and atrophy that occurs as the body breaks down tissues for energy and starts eating itself, as well as the bruising and dental difficulties frequently associated with hunger were common in Britain between 1830 and 1914. Furthermore, the poor health prompted by a weakened immune system made the individual more vulnerable to contracting and less able to fight off diseases such as cholera, influenza, measles, pneumonia, tuberculosis, typhus and typhoid. Vitamin deficiency could lead to rickets and scurvy; iron deficiency produced irritability, pallor and weakness; and iodine deficiency promoted intellectual disability and brain damage. More generally, symptoms of undernourishment and hunger included fatigue, lethargic and apathetic behaviour, dizziness, faintness or light-headedness, headaches, lack of concentration and nausea. As the body slows down both physical and mental activities in order to compensate for the lack of energy, the individual's capacity to concentrate, participate, study and take initiative is diminished. There was indeed no shortage of schoolteachers to report on the 'dullness' and 'feeble mindedness' of their pupils, and a retired teacher from Leeds recalled how in the early 1870s 'his children used not infrequently to faint from lack of food and neglect' (British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) 1904b: Q 552).

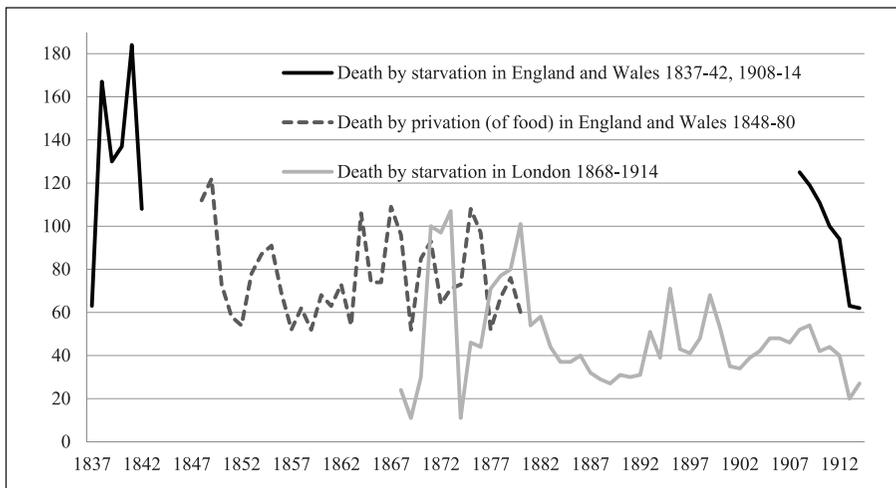
Hunger and starvation were alive and well in the early 1830s. Informed of the horrible state of the workhouse in the parish of Spitalfields where people 'were dying off like rotten sheep', Thomas Wakley, founding editor of *The Lancet* and staunch reformer, requested William Lovett and John Cleave, who would soon become important London-based Chartist leaders, to look into the matter more closely. 'We accordingly went,' Lovett (1879: 70, 71) recalls, 'and we found not only that the horrible state of the workhouse was true as described, but that the state of vast numbers out of it was even worse, for hunger and nakedness in many cases were added to the disease and wretchedness that prevailed.' Sadly, the metropolis had fierce competitors in human misery. In residence for more than 8 years at the Royal Infirmary and Poor House in Manchester in the 1830s, Dr Richard Baron Howard had become used to 'the extreme destitution they [the poor] often endure'. In numerous chilling passages, Howard (1839: iv, 4) described at length the general debility caused by hunger and starvation, the lethargic and exhausted condition, as well as the anaemic and weak condition of an industrial nation where 'in all large towns, even when no unusual cause of distress is in operation, individual cases of severe suffering from deficiency of food always exist'. As it happened, hunger showed troubling resilience throughout the period under review.

The collapse of paternalistic structures and solidarities was evidenced by James Grant's lament of the aristocracy's lack of sympathy towards the suffering poor. 'The quantities of food on which thousands of them subsists', Grant (1842: 164) reported, 'are incredibly small; sometimes a whole family, consisting of from five to ten individuals, are compelled to live (if living it can be called) on an amount of food which would not more than suffice for a hearty meal to a person possessing an ordinary appetite'. Social commentators often discovered with disbelief, and then horror, the conditions within which the working class lived, and the 'monstrous anomaly' of a 'civilized' nation producing wealth as surely as it produced poverty, social dislocation and human

degradation (Howard 1839: 3). Already distressing in 'normal' times, the condition of the working class reached new levels of wretchedness with the economic depression of 1839, which was followed by a few bad harvests. By 1840, William Pulteney Alison (1840: 8, 13) was reporting that 'the condition of great numbers of the poor in Edinburgh, particularly during the winter, is one of extreme destitution', further noting that 'the expenditure for coffins, for paupers and their children, is nearly *four* times as great now as in 1829-30.' The early 1840s were characterised by intense human suffering, which was painfully recorded in the Reports on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Populations of England and Scotland (BPP 1842b, 1842c, 1842d). The situation in Rochdale in 1842 was not more uplifting, with John Bright, a passionate member of the Anti-Corn Law League, reporting on how 'dreadfully hungry' people were (cited in McCord 1975: 127). Writing during the autumn of 1842, Samuel Laing (1844: 27) concluded that 'under ordinary circumstances, and in an average state of trade', about one-third of 2.5 million individuals dependent on the manufacturing sector was 'plunged in extreme misery, and hovering on the verge of actual starvation'. The Hungry Forties, as T. Fisher Unwin (1904) later called the social conditions in the 1840s, was a period of acute social misery.

Thanks to British epidemiologist William Farr's pioneering work in medical statistics, Queen Victoria's reign began by formally recognising what everybody knew. According to the first six annual reports for the Registrar-General, 63 deaths by starvation were recorded in England and Wales during the last 6 months of 1837, 167 in 1838, 130 in 1839, 136 in 1840, 196 in 1841, and 108 in 1842 (BPP 1839: 82, 1840: 21, 1841: 58, 1842a: 103, 1843: 197, 1844: 69). The political *malaise* surrounding such deaths must have been great, for it became impossible to officially die from starvation after 1842.<sup>1</sup> For many observers, the violence underpinning the establishment of a competitive labour market was obvious. Reflecting on the number of deaths by starvation in the first two reports, even the prestigious *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* felt compelled to remind its readers 'that it is rarely from pure want of food alone that death is produced', further noting 'that these casualties are in a great degree, if not altogether, to be ascribed to the mode in which relief is afforded under the provisions of the [1834 Poor Law Amendment] Act', (Anon 1841: 182; see Alison 1840: 184). It is therefore not surprising that Farr's analyses 'infuriated Edwin Chadwick, key architect of the New Poor Law and then its chief commissioner, who had, in an odd twist of fate, helped procure Farr his job' (Vernon 2007: 81).

From 1868 onwards, the number of deaths 'upon which a Coroner's jury has returned a verdict of death from starvation or accelerated by privation' was recorded for the metropolis, and in 1908, after a long night of silence, the category 'starvation' was officially reintroduced in the Annual Report of the Local Government Board, which started reporting on similar statistics for England and Wales as a whole. Figure 1 shows officially registered deaths by starvation in England and Wales. The first series records such deaths from 1837 to 1842 and from 1908 to 1914. The second series shows the number of deaths from 'privation of food' (1848-1857) and 'privation' (1858-1880) in England and Wales. Finally, the third series documents the number of deaths by starvation in London from 1868 to 1914, which were said to stand at 222 in 1848 and 516 in 1857 (Hollingshead 1861: 188-189).



**Figure 1.** Officially registered deaths by starvation and privation, 1837–1914.  
Source: Annual Reports of the Registrar-General, 1837–1914; Returns on London.

Coming from countries where industrial capitalism was only in its infancy, foreigners and immigrants were generally acute observers of the brutality of capitalism's 'civilizing' mission (Accum 1820; Buret 1841; Engels 2009; Lahr 1889; London 2001; Marx 1990). Upon visiting England in 1843, French economist Léon Faucher (1845: 69–70, 461, 466) was horrified that people died from want and exposure to cold. Similarly, German immigrant Lhorky (1844: 7) was appalled by the growing number of deaths by starvation occurring in London, Glasgow, Manchester, Bolton and other large towns, as well as by the 'hundred of thousands kept at "*the starvation point*" in our poor-houses.' For those who dared to look at the spectacle of starvation and wretchedness staged before their eyes, there was no escape: capitalism was actively engaged in the mass production of an ill-fed, ill-clothed, weak, anaemic, exhausted, emaciated and rickety industrial army. By the 1840s, the dehumanising occurrence of death by starvation inscribed on the bodies and in the flesh of those barely earning the right to live had become so acute that many found it difficult to reconcile it with the allegedly 'progressive' nature of the capitalist space economy. 'By conceding to the poor so much as even the *liberty of dying from want*,' Lhorky (1844: 12) wrote, 'the legislature of the country certainly has gone too far!'

The immiseration of the working class, including agricultural labourers, whose food, clothes and dwelling Robert Bremner (1839: 154–156) described, upon returning from a journey in the interior of Russia, as worse than the Russian serf, furnished the social, economic and political matrix within which the oratory skills and organisational abilities of the Anti-Corn Law League's most devout members were put to profit. As the political project of the capitalist elite gained traction, it received unexpected 'help' from the Great Irish Famine (1845–49). The road to modernity was not only paved with good intentions it seemed, but also with the emaciated and famished corpses of at least 1 million

Irish. During those years, Ireland would remain the ‘chief purveyor’ of England (Dodd 1848: 33). By January 1846, the situation had become politically unbearable. ‘The worst ground, on which we can fight the battle of true Conservatism,’ wrote Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, ‘is *food*’ (cited in Longmate 1984: 217). While Peel himself became convinced that the Corn Laws were a hindrance to economic growth and a threat to the established order he represented, he understood all too well that the days of agrarian dominance in Parliament were numbered.

To defend the Corn Laws – or Starvation Laws as some called them – had become increasingly difficult. Indeed, only a few weeks before the repeal, Farr (1846) presented evidence before the prestigious Statistical Society of London on the relationship between the index of mortality in England and the price of wheat and meat. High food prices, he found, were of great benefit to undertakers, whose ‘turnover’ increased accordingly. After years of prevarication, the Importation Act of June 1846 finally repealed the Corn Laws. The Navigation Laws, which for two centuries had protected British shipping against foreign competition, were also repealed in 1849 (Palmer 1990). ‘We have not seen the last of the barons,’ said John Bright, one of the greatest orators of the Anti-Corn Law League after the latter’s victory over the landed aristocracy, ‘but have taught them which way the world is turning’ (cited in Longmate 1984: 224). Providing cheap food for urban areas had become essential for a business class convinced that cheap imported supplies of food were key to cheap labour, capital investments and international competitiveness.

## **‘Well, there was always another hole in the belt!’<sup>2</sup>**

The repeal of the Corn Laws did not address the fundamental contradiction between capital and labour as much as it displaced it spatially through colonial and free trade policies oriented towards cheap food imports. Despite its importance, however, the great middle class agitation of the late 1830s and early 1840s for the repeal of the Corn Laws did not have its promises immediately fulfilled, as it took another 30 years for living standards to show any signs of improvement (Szreter & Mooney 1998). After all, free trade policies could only do so much, and the decrease of tariffs on imported foodstuffs was no substitute for the productive and technological inability to supply the needs of a population that was, by 1851, predominantly urban. Meanwhile, the willingness of the state to enforce *laissez-faire* principles would continue to uphold a view of ‘free’ labour as the liberty of dying from want. As Max Schlesinger (1853: 113) wrote in 1853, in and around Park Lane in Westminster, ‘the head-quarters of wealth and aristocracy’, one could see ‘here and there a woman and her child half-naked, and more than half-starved, crouching down in some dark corner.’ By 1854, those who could afford the imperial opulence displayed in Fish Street Hill in the form of pineapples, melons, forbidden fruit (pomegranate) and mangoes had to share the metropolis with ‘the large floating population of starving labour always to be found in the streets of London’ (Anon 1854: 301–302).

As food production at home did not keep up with a rapidly expanding market-dependent population, the morality of current practices was raised in multiple ways. William Lovett’s (1879) National Association of the United Kingdom issued on 20 January 1846, an ‘Address to the Working Classes of America on the War Spirit sought to be created between the two Countries’, which tried to find a peaceful solution

regarding the disputed territory of Oregon and which complained that the skill and labour of the soldiers necessary to go to war would be better employed to 'raise food, clothing, and habitations to bless the half-starved millions of our country' (p. 316). By 1850, 800,000 sheep and 73,000 cattle were slaughtered and boiled down in Australia to produce 11,000 tonnes of tallow for export to Britain. 'Viewed in connection with the fact that there are millions "at home" on the brink of starvation,' said Australian Dr Lang (cited in Critchell & Raymond 1912: 9), 'this destruction is discreditable to Great Britain and her rulers, and cannot but be peculiarly offensive in the sight of Heaven.' Three years later Mr Chester, delivering the centenary address of the Society of Arts, asked why Australia should be content with exporting wool and tallow to Britain, 'and not the mutton itself to the hungry masses of this country?' (cited in Critchell & Raymond 1912: 4). This obsession with food was also visible in the disproportionately high number of patents taken out for the preservation of food: 22 from 1691 to 1839, 33 between 1840 and 1849, and 55 from 1850 to 1855 (Scott 1868: 263–266). Here was a starving nation unable to feed itself and desperately trying to conjure the forces of capitalist social relations through the import of products from distant lands.

On 19 February 1855, after a particularly difficult winter, bread riots exploded in Liverpool. Bread shops were cleared of their stock by a hungry mob 'of desperate looking fellows' (Anon 1855). A few years later, in January 1861, bakers' shops in the East End of London were emptied by a mob of 30–40. The next day, between 7 and 9 o'clock at night, thousands gathered and cleared bakers' shops and eating-houses. Outnumbered, the mounted police were powerless to stop the desperate spectacle (Hollingshead 1861: 4). Indications of social degradation were everywhere to be seen in the metropolis, which 'is not managed, not cleansed, not relieved from the spectre of starvation which dances before us at our doors' (Hollingshead 1861: 6). Yet the events of 1861 were not isolated cases: 'almost every winter some of the bakers' shops are stripped of their contents by the starving multitudes' (Hollingshead 1861: 304). In his inaugural address of the International Working Men's Association in 1864, Marx (1864) did not need to convince his audience when he said that 'Death of starvation rose almost to the rank of an institution, during this intoxicating epoch of economical progress, in the metropolis of the British empire'. Not surprisingly, the extent to which capitalism produced both wealth and mass poverty was a central theme of *Capital*, published 3 years later.

For a working population already underfed in normal times, any disturbance in the labour market was likely to have significant consequences, and prolonged or 'abnormal' periods of unemployment, illness and underemployment could plunge a family into destitution within days. Sparked by the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Lancashire Cotton Famine of the early 1860s not only reminded mid-Victorian Lancashire workers that their fate was in the hands of an international capitalist economy, but also of how ordinary precariousness could rapidly turn into outright deprivation (Oddy 1983: 68). In 1862, under the request of the Privy Council, Dr Edward Smith visited these populations – especially the towns of Manchester, Ashton-under-Lyne, Wigan, Blackburn, Stockport and Preston – in order to inquire about the state of their diet. According to Smith (1863: 327), 'the degree of health which they [individual operatives] possess in

**Table 1.** Weekly food consumption of adult indoor workers.

	Silk-weavers and throwsters	Needlewomen	Kid glovers	Stocking and glove weavers	Shoemakers
Bread (lb.)	9.5	7.75	8.75	11.9	11.24
Potatoes (lb.)	2	2.5	5.25	4	3.5
Sugars (oz.)	7.25	7.25	4.25	11	10
Fats (oz.)	4.5	4.5	7	3.5	5.75
Meat (oz.)	32	16.25	18.25	12	15.75
	(per family)				
Milk	1.1 pints	7 oz.	18.25 oz.	1.25 pints	18 oz.
Tea (oz. per family)	2	2	1.75	2	3.5
Cheese (oz. per family)	–	–	19	12	14

Source: Smith (1864).

ordinary times [. . .] is not equal to that of other populations. The countenance, gums, and tongue are pale, the cheeks somewhat flat, the body not fleshy, and the muscles flabby, whilst the endurance of fatigue is less than that of those who live and labour in the open air.’ The defective quantity of food was an important element in the unhealthy colour of the skin, and ‘excessive elimination’ was common to these populations. Already appalling in normal times, their condition further declined during the famine, as they now obtained ‘less of nearly every kind of food eaten, but particularly of potato, sugar, butter, meat, and milk, with a considerable diminution also of bacon and tea’ (Smith 1863: 362). In many instances, bread was the only food that remained.

Smith extended his inquiry to the worst fed populations of the country the next year (Table 1). In referring to the silk weavers as ‘insufficiently nourished and of feeble health’, Smith not only confirmed Charles Manby Smith’s (1857: 303–304) opinion of them as ‘a patient and suffering race’ working for up to 20 hours per day and ‘leading a life of semi-starvation’, but also James Grant’s view, expressed almost three decades earlier, of Spitalfields’ 50,000 silk weavers as living in a state of ‘absolute starvation’ (Grant 1842: 314). The needlewomen were said to be ‘exceedingly ill fed, and show a feeble state of health’. Their wages were insufficient and not infrequently did they receive aid from the parish, generally a loaf of bread. Kid glovers and stitchers hardly fared better. Limiting his inquiry to women and children, Smith found that 12 hours of work were necessary to earn the right to survive. This occupation, argued Smith, produced ‘ill fed and unhealthy’ girls and women recognisable by their paleness, thin and sensitive skin, and emaciated and weak look. Short of consuming enough food to secure physical health, they in fact ‘were consuming their health and losing the pleasures of life for the barest pittance’. And while the stocking and glove weaver was condemned to be ‘a poor man, ill fed and ill clad, and without provision for the future’, the pale and weak look of third-class shoemakers did not offer a more positive picture of this class of workers.

Contemporaries were not oblivious to the problem facing Britain. In *The Food of the People*, Dr Joseph Brown (1865: 2) did not hesitate to call a cat a cat: 'this great state is not without "something rotten" within it . . . The plague spot, the skeleton in the closet of England, is that her people are underfed.' Estimating at 23,000 the number of people who died annually from insufficiency of food in the late 1860s, Wentworth Lascelles Scott remarked, 'it is not too much to say that the entire country is in a state of mitigated starvation'. More specifically, Scott was of the opinion that Britain was 'now at the eleventh hour attempting to remedy' the ongoing deficiency in meat supply. National production of meat was not only chronically insufficient, but increasingly so. London market prices for beef and mutton increased by 33.3% and 36.3% respectively between 1850–1851 and 1866–1867, thus suggesting a lagging supply (Scott 1868: 256–257; see Perren 1978: 67). Historian Eric J. Hobsbawm was certainly right when he referred to the third quarter of the 19th century as 'the age of capital', for by no means was it the age of labour.

Despite the betterment of social and economic conditions from the 1870s onwards, the reality of hunger and starvation remained well entrenched for a substantial segment of the working poor. In the early 1880s, self-described 'roving correspondent' James Greenwood (1883) wrote that either in Farringdon Market or Covent Garden in London, one would not have difficulty finding

at least a score of half-naked, dirty little children routing over the scavenger's swept-up heaps, exactly after the manner of pigs or ducks, gobbling up plums decayed out of all shape, rotten apples, oranges turned blue and with quite a hairy hide of mildew upon them – anything. (p. 150)

Of course, there was nothing new about starving children eking out their subsistence from the refuse of the metropolis. Already in the early 1830s, John Cleave was known 'to preserve from perishing many of the poor starving boys that were often to be found about the pens of Smithfield' (Lovett 1879: 65).

William Booth, Founder and first General (1878–1912) of a peculiar kind of army, The Salvation Army, was all too aware that one of the most important wars in which Britain was involved was waged at home against its working class:

Every year thousands of children are killed off by what is called defects of our sanitary system. They are in reality starved and poisoned, and all that can be said is that, in many cases, it is better for them that they were taken away from the trouble to come.

Booth (1890) estimated the 'total strength of the destitute army' in the metropolis at 993,000 souls – 51,000 paupers, 33,000 homeless, 300,000 starving and 609,000 very poor – and at 3 million in Great Britain (pp. 14, 21–23). Also decrying the barbarous, uncivilised atrocities perpetrated by capitalism, Jack London (2001: 27–28) described how in the early 1900s one man from the London's East End – 'skin an unhealthy colour, body gnarled and twisted out of all decency, contracted chest, shoulders bent prodigiously from long hours of toil, and head hanging heavily forward and out of place!' – boasted that, in comparison to his 'chaps at the shop', he was, at 5'2" and 10 stone

(140 pounds), quite 'a fine specimen of manhood'. Such was the destitute army, millions of poor people experiencing daily the pain of undernourishment, their bodies carved by the torments of hunger.

As many commentators anxiously pointed out, decades of economic 'progress' did not substantially alter the lives of millions of working poor earning a starvation wage (Blatchford 1895; Booth 1889, 1891; Chiozza Money 1905; Higgs 1913; Hobson 1913; Lahr 1889; Rowntree 1971; Sherard 1897, 1905; White 1901). When Sir William Taylor, Director General of the Army Medical Service, sent a Memoranda in 1902 from the War Office reporting that, according to the Inspector General of Recruiting, between 40% and 60% of army recruits were found unfit to carry a rifle, the whole debate over 'national efficiency' reached new proportions. Taylor's intervention fuelled the bourgeois moral panic that had developed during the 1880s and 1890s. Growing anxiety over a declining birth rate, mounting imperial, industrial and commercial competition, the 'discovery' of the appalling conditions of life of agricultural labourers, long held as the repository of the strength of the nation, and the mediocre performance of the army during the Boer Wars (1899–1902) had prepared the ground for eugenics, biometricians and other racists to argue that a progressive physical, intellectual, cultural and moral degeneracy of the British 'race' was taking place.

The Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was created in order to investigate these allegations. In its report, the committee recognised the resilience of physical deterioration among the poorest classes, yet argued that the general health of the nation was improving (BPP 1904a). Generalisations based solely on the records of the recruiting departments of the army were likely to be misleading, especially given that, in the absence of conscription, the army was forced to compete in the labour market with other working class occupations. It was the trade boom accompanying the war that absorbed a greater proportion of unskilled boys within industrial sectors and thereby forced military authorities to recruit among the lowest classes (BPP 1904a: 2, 1904b: Q 2188; Floud et al. 1990: 31–2). 'Your soldier,' wrote George Bernard Shaw (1895: 25), 'ostensibly a heroic and patriotic defender of his country, is really an unfortunate man driven by destitution to offer himself as food for powder for the sake of regular rations, shelter, and clothing.' Taylor (BPP 1904b) himself would later recognise that

when we get our half-starved recruits from the slums or the lanes of the country, the first thing you ought to do is to take care of them and give them good food, as they do in the Navy, and afterwards try to improve their muscular development. (Q 67)

Despite its encouraging assessment, however, the Committee also revealed that in certain districts a considerable number of children were suffering from poor or very poor nutrition. Dr Alfred Eichholz, Inspector of Schools in London, estimated that 122,000 children (16%) of the elementary school population of the metropolis were underfed, receiving food during the year from different charitable organisations. Similar figures for Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and other large towns were not wanting (Alden 1908: 84, 98; BPP 1903: 76–100, 1904b: QQ, 476, 13039, 13246, 13282–3).

Poverty remained a key social, political and economic issue up to 1914. From the writings of Friedrich Engels to Maud Pember Reeves to Jack London, and from Charles Dickens to Margaret Harkness to Robert Roberts, one can glean that there was still a substantial part of the working class caught in the strong arms of poverty (BPP 1904b: Q 6172; Foley 1990). Amid unprecedented economic development and technological progress, the ruling elite's sentiment of moral superiority was seriously destabilised in the late 1880s by Charles Booth's extensive social survey, which revealed that 30.7% of the population in London lived in poverty (Booth 1889: 33, 1891: 21).<sup>3</sup> Booth's findings were upheld by B. Seebohm Rowntree's study of poverty in York in 1901. His extended survey of 11,560 poor wage-earning families revealed that 27.84% of the total population of the city lived in poverty (Rowntree 1971). The importance of both studies was twofold. First, they confirmed the resilience of poverty amid plenty, shedding light on the existence of an important segment of the working class that was economically marginalised and socially confined to chronic distress. Second, both social surveys shattered the bourgeois idea that poverty was the result of moral failure and personal, self-inflicted choices. By demonstrating that poverty was largely caused by variables outside of their control (e.g. low wages, cyclical unemployment, death of the chief wage earner), they highlighted the existence of an important class of casual workers with no hope whatsoever to work themselves out of poverty. Subsequent surveys on the resilience of poverty reinforced the view that there was something rotten at the core of bourgeois morality (Beveridge 1909; Bowley & Burnett-Hurst 1915, 1920; Davies 1909; Howarth & Wilson 1907; Mann 1904).

The morbid effects of hunger and starvation retained their full force up to 1914, albeit at a much lower scale than during the middle decades of the 19th century. Floud (2003: 15) has argued that 'up to a third of the population in 1914 had incomes which did not provide them with sufficient food to sustain health throughout the year.' Generations of working class people were marked by the profound wrinkles left by chronic or temporary lack of food. 'The lank-haired, hollow-chested creatures who stare out at us from the illustrations of Doré, or from the pages of *Punch*, the *Illustrated London News*, or *The Graphic*,' wrote Anthony S. Wohl (1983: 57), 'were no exaggeration, no artist's license, no mere rhetorical device. They graphically illustrate a race condemned by poor nutrition.' The battle to keep the wolf from the door was waged through the agonising pain of an empty stomach, the shared experience of poverty wages, and the common yet uneven sacrifice made by members of the household to make ends meet. For those who escaped the quicksand of starvation and survived the physical, psychological and emotional trauma associated with food deficiency, the reality remained all too often grim. Many others perished – directly or indirectly – from their chronic state of undernourishment. During this period millions of British working class people learned it the hard way that the foundation of this brave new world was based on their freedom to starve.

## Conclusion

Despite Farr's pioneering model of medical statistics, his system of classification had its own limits. In the vast majority of cases, the very act of classifying someone's death by

ascribing to it a direct cause was also the very act by which the embodied history of hunger and starvation was effectively evacuated from medical statistics, thus sanitising the history of capitalism. Farr himself admitted that 'starvation' was rarely the direct cause of death:

Hunger destroys a much higher proportion that is indicated by the registers in this and in every other country; but its effects, like the effects of excess, are generally manifested indirectly, in the production of diseases of various kinds. The privation is rarely ever absolute. (BPP 1839: 75)

Similarly, John A. Hobson (1913: 18) observed in 1891 that the number of deaths by starvation was 'no adequate measure of the facts. For every recorded case there will be a hundred unrecorded cases where starvation is the practical immediate cause of death'. As J. Lhorky had already recognised in 1844, cases of death by starvation occurred only on extraordinary occasions, for in the vast majority of cases underfed people were '*dying by inches*' from inanition, their immune system simply too weak from the deficiency of nutrition to fight air-, water- and food-borne diseases (Lhorky 1844: 5; see Alison 1840: 18; BPP 1847–1848: 171, 1881: 40; Engels 2009: 38; Farr 1846: 158; Howard 1839: 7, 38; Smith 1863: 320, 1979). Waves of cholera, influenza, smallpox, tuberculosis, typhus and typhoid combined with the social plagues of poverty, unemployment and the lack of sanitary facilities and infrastructure to produce an environment conducive to low life expectancy.

Although 'starvation' was not used in the government's annual reports for most of the period under review, deaths classified under headings such as 'privation of food', 'anaemia', 'want of breast milk', 'inanition of infancy', 'rickets', 'malformations' or 'premature birth' offer an entry point to the social reality of hunger and starvation. The generational and gendered nature of these categories – most deaths were from infants, young children under 5 years of age and women – suggests that they must have been greatly influenced by nutrition status. Because of the uneven distribution of food among members of the family, poverty and chronic undernourishment were particularly detrimental to working class mothers (Pember Reeves 1914; Rioux 2015a; Ross 1993). Women's health is key to infants' health, and therefore must be seen as an important vector influencing their development. Starving, underfed and malnourished mothers were poorly equipped to raise vigorous and healthy children. While some of them died of various diseases, more or less influenced by food deficiency, most grew up knowing full well the pain associated with an empty belly. How many came to embody such sufferings through deformed, weak, anaemic and stunted bodies? And how many died from diseases as a result of momentary, cyclical or prolonged periods of food insecurity? Although it is difficult to answer with certainty, there is no doubt that recorded deaths whose cause is directly or indirectly related to the lack of food is much more important than what medical statistics suggest.

In this essay, I have argued that the contradiction between capital and labour is expressed first and foremost as a corporeal crisis. In grounding social reproduction theory on the dialectics between the 'freedom to starve' underpinning wage-labour and the 'right to live' instituted through relief institutions, this approach is better equipped to account for the ways in which life-making processes are subordinated to accumulation under capitalism. The history of hunger and starvation in modern Britain is a painful

reminder of the corporeal nature of class experience at a time during which there was no welfare state to mediate the worst effects of the contradiction between capital and labour. In this respect, the push for social protection in the early 1900s signals an important shift in social reproduction – and which was fully institutionalised only during the decades following the Second World War – to mitigate the worst effects of market dependency through the institution and state recognition of the right to live.

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## Notes

1. On the politics of removing ‘starvation’ as a recognised cause of death, see Engels (2009: 38) and Lhorky (1844: 11).
2. see Morrison (1895: 94).
3. On the different theories of progressive degeneration, see Soloway (1982: 38).

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