Messer (2009) Rising Food Prices and Violence

While numerous factors contribute to social unrest and violence, food availability and proper allocation is a ubiquitous concern. Particularly in urban populations, food insecurity often culminates in both riots and nonviolent demonstrations. Still more prevalent is the utilization of food as a weapon, withheld as a means of control (Messer, 2009: 18). Lack of availability of food is irrefutably detrimental to both individual members of a population and the population as a whole. However, mismanagement and improper allocation of available resources is often the fuel for civil unrest and so-called “food wars” (Messer, 2009: 12).

Many reasons have been cited as causal in many food-insecure situations, including “aggregate shortfalls, widespread lack of access…severe localized food insecurity…low productivity, HIV/AIDS, adverse weather, deepening economic crisis, [and] natural disasters”, among many others (Messer, 2009: 14). Regardless of origin, the result of these food insufficiencies is often violence—but not always. For example, several of the nations most affected by hunger either reported no protests whatsoever or only nonviolent protests (Messer, 2009: 14). It would be interesting to investigate what differences exist that results in violent as opposed to nonviolent protests. It seems logical that there would be certain interactions amongst numerous variables that could perhaps be used to predict areas that are more prone to violence.

One point that Messer stresses is the fact that armed violence and conflict are some of the most common and pervasive factors in prolonged food loss. Messer elucidates several reasons for this. Messer argues that conflict contributes directly to hunger, such as deprivation as a means of control by adversaries. Also cited are indirect causes, such as diminished availability of individuals to work in agriculture. The result is often long-term food shortages that persist long after the conflict has ended. It is interesting to consider the long-term implications of violence on food availability. Generally, people focus on the political implications of conflict. However, it is obvious that the implications on hunger are equally profound and relevant. Incidentally, it is interesting to consider the fact that riots caused by hunger can only serve to worsen and prolong the situation.

Messer also investigates the role of alternative biofuels in food-related conflicts (Messer, 2009: 20). The argument here is that the new push for alternative fuels often results in the allocation of edible resources (such as corn in the case of ethanol) for non-edible purposes. As a result, individuals are further frustrated by the knowledge that the food exists and is available, but is not readily available for their consumption. Messer points out that this is a big concern for “large producers of raw materials”, such as Brazil (Messer, 2009: 13).

Overall, Messer seems intent on stressing the importance of food relationships in predicting, explaining, and managing conflict. The take-home message is that, while there are obviously many contributing factors, the implications of hunger should not be discounted. While Messer argues that the main result of conflict is longer and more profound hunger, the alternative is not often preferable. This is especially relevant in the case of oppressive governments in which food is either intentionally withheld or improperly allocated. This would be a useful source for anyone who was interested in implications of hunger as well as potential causes of civil unrest.

Good work! Very rare for me to make so few edits.