

earthquakes or tsunamis devastate entire countries, international efforts usually succeed in preventing famine. Though hundreds of millions still go hungry almost every day, in most countries very few people actually starve to death. Poverty certainly causes many other health problems, and malnutrition shortens life expectancy even in the richest countries on earth. In France, for example, 6 million people (about 10 per cent of the population) suffer from nutritional insecurity. They wake up in the morning not knowing whether they will have anything to eat for lunch; they often go to sleep hungry; and the nutrition they do obtain is unbalanced and unhealthy – lots of starch, sugar and salt, and not enough protein and vitamins.³ Yet nutritional insecurity isn't famine, and France of the early twenty-first century isn't France of 1694. Even in the worst slums around Beauvais or Paris, people don't die because they have not eaten for weeks on end.

The same transformation has occurred in numerous other countries, most notably China. For millennia, famine stalked every Chinese regime from the Yellow Emperor to the Red communists. A few decades ago China was a byword for food shortages. Tens of millions of Chinese starved to death during the disastrous Great Leap Forward, and experts routinely predicted that the problem would only get worse. In 1974 the first World Food Conference was convened in Rome, and delegates were treated to apocalyptic scenarios. They were told that there was no way for China to feed its billion people, and that the world's most populous country was heading towards catastrophe. In fact, it was heading towards the greatest economic miracle in history. Since 1974 hundreds of millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, and though hundreds of millions more still suffer greatly from privation and malnutrition, for the first time in its recorded history China is now free from famine.

Indeed, in most countries today overeating has become a far worse problem than famine. In the eighteenth century Marie Antoinette allegedly advised the starving masses that if they ran out of bread, they should just eat cake instead. Today, the poor are following this advice to the letter. Whereas the rich residents of Beverly Hills eat lettuce salad and steamed tofu with quinoa, in the slums and ghettos the poor gorge on Twinkie cakes, Cheetos, hamburgers and pizza. In 2014 more than 2.1 billion people were overweight, compared to 850 million who suffered from malnutrition. Half of humankind is expected to be overweight by 2030.⁴ In 2010 famine and malnutrition combined killed about 1 million people, whereas obesity killed 3 million.⁵