

Climate, Food & Famine in History

Open to a range of time periods and disciplinary backgrounds, this workshop is concerned with the history of climate-orientated narratives in relation to food and famine. At a time of rebounding climate discourse, the use of climate-orientated narratives as explanatory devices for food shortages and famine has come under increased scrutiny. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon attracted criticism in 2007 when he attributed the Dafur conflict to climate change-induced food insecurity. More recently, in 2015, Barack Obama controversially used the Syrian civil war as an example to frame climate change as a security problem: 'It's now believed that drought and crop failures and high food prices helped fuel the early unrest in Syria, which descended into civil war in the heart of the Middle East. So, increasingly, our military and our combatant commands, our services [...] will need to factor climate change into plans and operations.' In 2021 the World Food Programme website claimed that families 'are stuck in a cycle of conflict, climate shocks and rising levels of hunger' in relation to the ongoing famine in South Sudan. This workshop aims to bring academics together to provide historical context for such claims.

Relevant work includes Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts*, which argues, for example, that research into hypothetical sunspot-driven climatic changes was utilised to help excuse British authorities who oversaw the Great Famine in India. Philip Slavin (2019) has presented a complex picture of the British famine of 1314-17, where agriculturalists had to face unrelenting taxes and forced food sales alongside an inclement climate. Critiques of climate attribution theses have a long history, with meteorologist Rolando Garcia's 1981 work *Nature Pleads Not Guilty* disputing the climate attribution thesis of food insecurity in the 1970s. More recent work by Jan Selby, Omar Dahi, Christiane Fröhlich, and Mike Hulme has interrogated the climate attribution thesis of the Syrian conflict, arguing that policymakers should exercise greater caution when drawing such links. Even more recently, Myanna Lahsen and Jesse Ribot (2022) argued that 'climate-centric disaster framing can erase from view—and, thus, from policy agendas—the very socio-economic and political factors that most centrally cause vulnerability and suffering in weather extremes and disasters.'

Such discussions are rich, but often suffer from being siloed in isolated academic subjects and institutions. This workshop aims to bring together scholars across disciplines to critically examine powerful and controversial climate-based narratives around food insecurity that have long permeated public discourse.



An intimate 1-day event that seeks to assemble individuals with various research backgrounds (e.g. environmental history, HSTM, social sciences, atmospheric science) in an effort to generate critical transdisciplinary engagement around the intersection between climate, food, and famine in history.

April 14, 2023, 9:00-16:00 BST

Room 2.57 Simon Building, University of Manchester, UK

Deadline for abstracts (300 words): December 15, 2022

Registration information for non-presenting participants will be circulated at a later date.

Format: 20-minute presentation followed by 10-minutes of discussion at the end of each panel. 50-minute roundtable to finish proceedings.

Please send your submissions and any queries to Robert Naylor and Eleanor Shaw (conference organisers):

climate.food.famine@gmail.com

A limited number of travel bursaries are available (with priority for early career researchers). Please email for details. In the first instance this is an in-person event. However, if you wish to contribute but cannot travel please contact us.

