

# Food riots

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## Theories of Food and Riot

“Food riot” is a term applied to mass protests over the price and accessibility of key foods. The protests usually occur in urban areas and are associated with other kinds of political organizing. The foods over which protests are made are usually staple cereals or products such as [bread](#) that are made from such cereals, though people have also rioted over other important food such as meat ([Orlove 1997](#)).

The phenomenon of people taking to the streets to protest hunger has a very long history. Cicero (106–43 BC) witnessed this first-hand, when his house was attacked by a hungry and angry mob. The first serious study of the food riot as a political phenomenon was conducted by E. P. Thompson in a piece entitled “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” (1971). Thompson's aim was to tease apart the term “riot,” situating the events surrounding this form of protest in a broader political context. Key to this was his idea that food riots were not a direct function of food shortage in the

material economy, but a sign of contest over the rules of how the economy worked. He used the term “moral economy” to point to the cluster of political and pre-political ideas circulating within society that governed the natural and desirable means of the distribution of common wealth. This moral economy was not only manifest in times of protest, but a fixture of social life and governance in the eighteenth century. “The word ‘riot’ is,” Thompson observed, “too small to encompass all this” (1971: 79). His analysis offered a means to understand some of the most spectacular food riots of the eighteenth century, which were not to be found in England, but in France.

## The French Revolution



[Tilly \(1971\)](#) points to two key features that spawned food riots, also linking them to Thompson's idea of moral economy. First, she suggests the formation of a national market in grain eroded the kinds of local control over the economy that were possible for peasants and the urban poor to exercise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Second, the French government's withdrawal from strong market regulation and price-setting meant an end to the varieties of paternalism and *noblesse oblige* on which large swathes of the working poor depended in times of crisis.

The gap between people's expectation of the moral economy and their experience of poverty within the material economy has been explained by development economist Amartya Sen as an “entitlement failure.” Sen's seminal work on hunger and famine serves as a helpful corollary to Thompson – if the latter's work made it much harder to use the term “riot” unproblematically, Sen did the same for the term “famine.” His 1981 work on the Bengal Famine of 1943, in which between 1.5 and 3 million people died, pointed to a key problem in food economics. In times of modern famine, food has always been available. Famine is, in other words, not a result of a food shortage. The reason that people died in Bengal was that they lacked the means to buy food on the open market. Having seen that this was not, then, a problem of inadequate supply or want of demand, Sen theorized this as an “entitlement failure.”

This thinking around entitlements has been deployed in understanding the [French Revolution](#). It was, of course, about more than simply food, but the sentiment “let them eat cake” – mistakenly attributed to Marie Antoinette rather than, more plausibly, to Maria Theresa of Spain, the wife of Louis XIV – points to the tenor of the protests. Tilly notes that the *Sans-Culottes* had explicit food-related demands: “During the French revolution, the Maximum ... [a] Jacobin version of ‘war communism,’ was a response to entitlement loss” (1983: 339).

It is the dynamics of the moral economy and the perception of injustice, not a simple shortage of food, which explains the emergence of mass protest in the run up to, and in the 50 years after, the French Revolution. Food riots continued in France well into the 1850s. This can again be explained with respect to shifts within the moral economy, for the shift from paternalism to laissez-faire was protracted – the replacement of one set of

entitlements with another was not smooth or swift, but fragmentary, disjointed, and sometimes violent. Theorists attribute the end of protests, however, to the successful completion of the bourgeois project. Protests end when markets in food have successfully been instituted and, similarly, when other forms of protest (such as a strike for higher wages to afford better or more food) became predominant.

## World War I Protests



Food riots did not, however, disappear. At the end of World War I a number of instances of food riots were observed, particularly in North America. Food riots broke out in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Toronto and, most notably, in New York ([Frank 1985: 264](#)). The price of food in North America had, after 1916, started to rise dramatically. Increasing quantities of North American grain were being diverted to Europe, still in the throes of the war. This drain on the grain markets, while welcomed by farmers, caused tremendous hardship in urban areas. Again, however, the hardship was widespread, but while some areas saw protest, others did not.

Beyond being in urban areas, the protests had two key common features: they were usually linked to radical (usually socialist or communist) organizations and the majority of participants and organizers were [women](#). The idea of a moral economy works well here. The gap between expectations and reality was fueled, on the one hand, by food price inflation making food less attainable, and on the other by revolutionary organizing that suggested an economic logic at variance with capitalism. There were, furthermore, no ready alternative means for women to register their protest. In the US, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, recognizing women's right to vote, was only passed in 1920, about five years later (with some variation across provinces) than in Canada. The streets were the only place that women could make their voices heard. Food riots were also a means through which organizing to win the vote was carried out. As a contemporary New York magazine reported, “the need of votes for women, to strengthen this new woman's movement, will be emphasized at every anti-high price meeting” ([Frank 1985: 279](#)).

It was no accident that women found themselves in the front line – the gendered division of labor laid the duties of domestic reproduction at their door. The language of protest in 1917 still rings true. Consider this quote: “With \$14 a week we used to just make a living. With prices as they are now, we could not even live on \$2 a day. We would just exist.” The woman who said this was interviewed in New York on the front lines of an East Side Jewish Women's protest. But she might have come from any of the developing countries that have, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, experienced agricultural inflation-related riots.

## IMF Riots

As part of the disciplines of structural adjustment, governments have rolled back state-based entitlements, particularly in the domain of social welfare. These entitlements, such as access to education, healthcare, and basic needs, are not eroded uniformly ([Tilly 1983](#)). That the disproportionate burden borne by the poor, and poor women in particular, has resulted in women's organizing, has been central ([Daines & Seddon 1994](#)) to the increasing incidence of what have been called "IMF riots." Between 1976 and 1982 there were at least 146 such riots, with a peak at the beginning of the widespread imposition of monetarist economic policy between 1983 and 1985. Explaining this, Walton and Seddon suggest that austerity protests be defined as "large-scale collective actions including political demonstrations, general strikes, and riots, which are animated by grievances over state policies of economic liberalization, implemented in response to the debt crisis and market reforms urged by international agencies" (1994: 39). They further suggest that because the economic policies that mandated austerity were often authored by multilateral institutions such as the [World Bank and International Monetary Fund](#), such protests have come to be called IMF riots. The term can, however, be a little misleading, in that it suggests that the ire of the crowds was directed exclusively at a Bretton Woods institution rather than at a cluster of individuals and policies, domestic and international. Indeed, the strength of the link between actual IMF involvement in economic policy management and subsequent riots has been disputed. Despite strong claims for an association between the two ([Walton & Ragin 1990](#)), some scholars have seen a more complex relationship, in which IMF riots occur either at the beginning or several years after a structural adjustment policy.

Thompson's theories of moral economy continue to be useful in explaining these phenomena. Again, the incidence of protest is not correlated to material indicators of deprivation, but to the gap between expected and actual entitlements, and the available repertoire of forms of protest. Preexisting political organizing, whether in unions, Islamic brotherhoods, churches, or housewives' clubs, raises expectations, and expands the repertoire of protest.

Recently, however, a new phenomenon has precipitated a fresh round of food riots. In 2007 grain harvests were particularly poor. This combined with the high price of fossil fuels (used throughout fertilizer and farming processes), an increasing demand for meat (and therefore feedgrain for livestock), and a reduction in the available food supply due to demand for bio-fuels, led to increasing prices for food. The price rises, known as "agflation," have been so rapid that even modest expectations of entitlement have been rendered moot. With governments increasingly unresponsive to popular pressure (most structural adjustment programs are unpopular), conventional petitions to parliaments are often ineffective.

Thus, in the period 2007–8, the world has seen widespread political protest around food, from the pasta protests of Italy, to Mexican tortilla riots which resulted in a government promise for price stability, to the rise of protests in parts of Africa considered immune to

them, such as Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. It seems as if the food riot is not quite ready for the dustbin of history.

SEE ALSO: [Food Not Bombs, United States](#); [Food Sovereignty and Protest](#); [French Revolution, 1789–1794](#); [French Revolution, Women and](#); [Masses, The](#)

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