

Food, Power, and Rebellion:
How Control of Sustenance Shapes Resistance and Authoritarian Rule

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Abstract

Food has always been more than a source of survival—it is a language of power. Across history, control of food systems has served as both an instrument of rebellion and a mechanism of authoritarian dominance. This paper examines the political, economic, and psychological dimensions of food as a tool of governance and resistance. Drawing on theories of entitlement (Sen, 1981), moral economy (Thompson, 1971), and contemporary analyses of food insecurity (de Waal, 2018), it explores how leaders weaponize scarcity, rationing, and subsidies to maintain obedience, and how communities respond through protest, riot, and the creation of alternative distribution networks. Case studies range from the Salt March and the Richmond Bread Riot to modern examples in Syria, Yemen, and the Russia-Ukraine grain conflict. The paper also investigates how domestic policy decisions—such as reductions to the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the Trump administration—reflect a subtler form of economic control, with lasting repercussions for low-income communities and social cohesion. By tracing these patterns across eras and systems of government, this study argues that hunger is rarely accidental—it is often engineered, revealing the enduring intersection between food, power, and resistance.

Keywords: *food politics; famine; rebellion; authoritarianism; SNAP; U.S. policy; moral economy; entitlement theory; food riots; starvation; political economy; humanitarian law; social control; resistance*

1. Introduction

Food has always existed at the intersection of necessity and power. It nourishes the body, sustains communities, and quietly structures political life. Yet throughout history, control over food has also become a form of governance—one that determines who eats, when, and under what conditions. From imperial salt taxes to modern trade blockades, food has been both the substance of rebellion and the scaffolding of authoritarian rule. It can unite people in shared resistance or divide them through calculated deprivation. Few resources carry such intimate and immediate political weight.

The politics of hunger are rarely about agriculture alone. As Amartya Sen (1981) argued in *Poverty and Famines*, famine seldom results from a lack of food itself but from the breakdown of entitlement—the social and economic rights that determine access to it. Similarly, E.P. Thompson's (1971) concept of the moral economy suggests that collective uprisings, such as bread riots, often arise not from random chaos but from deeply held expectations about fairness and justice in distribution. When governments violate these expectations—by manipulating subsidies, restricting access, or exploiting hunger—they provoke unrest that transcends class and ideology. Food becomes not just sustenance but symbol: of dignity, autonomy, and the right to exist without coercion.

Authoritarian regimes have long recognized this power. Control over food distribution allows leaders to maintain obedience without overt violence, using hunger as both punishment and persuasion. Stalin's use of agricultural quotas during the Holodomor, Mao's Great Leap Forward, and the siege tactics seen in modern Syria and Yemen all reveal how starvation can be deliberately engineered as an instrument of

rule. In these contexts, food becomes a currency of compliance—its scarcity, a constant reminder of who holds power.

But the politics of hunger are not confined to distant autocracies. In democratic nations, the manipulation of food policy can still operate as a quiet form of social control. In the United States, debates over welfare and food assistance often carry moral and political undertones that echo older struggles over entitlement. Reductions to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the Trump administration, for instance, were framed as fiscal responsibility but had profound and lasting repercussions on low-income households. These cuts disproportionately affected children, the elderly, and the working poor—communities already vulnerable to economic instability. By tightening eligibility and reducing benefits, policymakers effectively weaponized scarcity, not through siege or famine, but through legislation.

This intersection between policy and deprivation highlights a deeper question: how do societies justify who deserves to eat? Whether through colonial taxes, wartime blockades, or bureaucratic austerity, the control of food consistently mirrors the moral and political logic of its time. Understanding this connection demands an interdisciplinary approach—one that bridges history, economics, ethics, and international law. It also requires confronting an uncomfortable truth: that hunger, while tragic, is rarely accidental. It is often designed, distributed, and defended in the name of order.

This paper explores the use of food as both a tool of rebellion and a mechanism of authoritarian control across historical and contemporary contexts. Drawing on Sen's entitlement theory, Thompson's moral economy, and de Waal's (2018) analysis of

famine as political crime, it examines case studies from the Salt March and the Richmond Bread Riot to the Arab Spring and the Russia–Ukraine grain conflict. It also situates these patterns within current U.S. policy debates, asking whether reductions in social welfare programs reflect a subtler form of economic coercion. Ultimately, this study argues that food, in all its forms, is never politically neutral. It is a mirror of power—reflecting the values, fears, and inequalities of every society that controls it.

2. Theoretical & Legal Foundations

Understanding how food morphs from mere sustenance into a vector of power demands a layered approach. It's not simply about scarcity or supply—it's about who controls access, how the rules are framed, and what moral expectations societies place on provisioning. Three interlocking frameworks provide a robust lens: entitlement theory, moral economy, and the evolving legal recognition of food-denial as an instrument of war.

Entitlement Theory: Access, Rights, and Vulnerability

The foundational insight from Amartya Sen (1981) is that famines result less from insufficient food production than from the failure of entitlements—work, trade, welfare—that give individuals command over food. In other words, hunger is often a failure of rights and mechanisms, not a failure of fields. This structural lens helps explain why food insecurity appears even in regions with “enough” food overall, but with unequal access or disrupted markets.

Recent scholarship advances this by showing how entitlement theory holds in contemporary contexts: for example, Chanaliya (2025) develops a framework linking expanding production, trade, labour rights and aid with greater food accessibility, thereby extending Sen's approach into globalised systems. (Chanaliya, 2025) This underscores that entitlement is dynamic—shaped by policy, law, and global integration, not just by agriculture.

When a state or regime undermines entitlements—by cutting welfare, restricting labour rights, raising prices, or choking aid—it weaponises hunger. In democratic societies the logic is subtler: narrowing eligibility for food assistance translates into restricted entitlement, converting policy decisions into power plays. For instance, recent U.S. policy debates around Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) show how entitlements may be recast as privileges, rather than rights (MediaMatters, 2025).

Moral Economy: Food, Justice, and Collective Expectation

Where entitlement theory explains how hunger happens, the moral economy explains why people protest it. E. P. Thompson's (1971) classic study of bread riots in eighteenth-century England reveals that crowds did not riot simply because they were hungry—they rose because perceived norms of fairness and subsistence were violated. For many communities, the expectation that “we deserve to eat” stands at the heart of revolt.

This concept remains deeply relevant. When subsidies are removed, food prices soar, or aid is blocked, the disruption is not only economic but moral. People believe that society or the state has a duty to feed them—or at least should not prevent them

from feeding themselves. When that expectation is broken, rebellion is moral as much as political.

For example, recent narratives around food assistance in the U.S. frame recipients as “undeserving,” shifting the moral economy such that hunger becomes a sign of fault rather than failure of systems (Gothamist, 2025). The moral economy thus operates in both rebel and authoritarian contexts: either in protests over lost subsidies, or in regimes that exploit moral guilt to tighten control.

Legal Recognition: Starvation as a Tool of War and Crime

The final dimension is legal: when does food denial cease being incidental and become a weapon? Scholars like de Waal (2018, 2024) assert that in modern conflicts famine is often engineered, not accidental. The legal system is beginning to catch up: for instance, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) explicitly condemns starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. Legislative bodies and humanitarian agencies are increasingly treating food denial as a war crime (Hansard, 2025).

The past two years offer alarming confirmation: the siege of the Gaza Strip, the crisis in Sudan and other blocked access zones illustrate how food, fuel, and medicine are being withheld as strategy (Food Tank, 2025; Tognocchi, 2025). These cases illustrate how the legal and humanitarian frameworks intersect with entitlement and moral-economy logics: starvation is enabled by entitlement failure, justified by moral narratives, and in some instances prosecuted as crime.

Integrating the Frameworks

Together, these three lenses—entitlement theory, moral economy, and legal recognition—provide a richly layered understanding:

Entitlement theory tells us how food access is structured; Moral economy explains why people rebel when that access is denied; Legal recognition identifies when such denial is a matter of international justice, not just domestic policy.

They also allow us to bridge domestic and global arenas. Something as rural as a bread riot in nineteenth-century Europe and as global as aid denial in Gaza share the same logic of control, expectation, and legitimacy. Even in democracies, when food assistance is reframed as a privilege rather than a right, the logic of hunger as leverage fits the same pattern. Food becomes a mirror to power: who controls it, who receives it, and who is denied it.

This theoretical-legal anchor sets the stage for the empirical explorations that follow. In the next section, we will trace the historical roots of food-based rebellion, and thereafter examine how authoritarian regimes and contemporary policy decisions exploit similar patterns of access, expectation, and control.

3. Historical Roots of Food-Based Rebellion

Throughout history, the politics of food have fueled some of the world's most enduring acts of defiance. When leaders attempted to control what people ate—or taxed the very ingredients of life—hunger transformed into political fire. Food, in these moments, became both symbol and weapon: a way for ordinary citizens to reclaim

agency from distant powers. Tracing these roots reveals that rebellion has often begun not with ideology, but with appetite.

Bread, Justice, and the Moral Economy

In eighteenth-century England and France, bread was more than daily sustenance—it was the measure of justice. The uprisings that erupted in response to soaring grain prices were not simply riots of desperation but expressions of Thompson’s moral economy in action. When authorities deregulated grain markets and allowed speculation to drive up prices, the poor interpreted it as a betrayal of communal ethics. In England, women frequently led such protests, seizing carts of flour or forcing bakers to sell bread at what they deemed a “just price.” These actions weren’t viewed as criminal by the participants, but as restorative—attempts to correct moral imbalance. In France, similar revolts foreshadowed the Revolution itself. As one Parisian crowd shouted in 1789, “We are hungry, not slaves.” The call for bread became a call for liberty.

Salt and Tea: Colonial Rebellion Through Common Goods

Few commodities reveal the political potential of the everyday like salt and tea. In British-ruled India, the colonial salt tax symbolized imperial intrusion into even the most basic human need. Mahatma Gandhi’s 1930 Salt March transformed a common mineral into a national metaphor for sovereignty. The act of harvesting salt from the sea was both literal and symbolic defiance—a reclamation of nature’s bounty from the hands of empire. Similarly, the Boston Tea Party of 1773 turned a taxed luxury into a statement of

autonomy. Colonists hurled East India Company tea into Boston Harbor not because they lacked access to it, but because they refused to accept control over it. Both events demonstrate that food and drink, though mundane, hold immense power to articulate collective identity and resist domination.

Bread Riots and the Politics of the Home Front

During the American Civil War, the Richmond Bread Riot of 1863 exposed how deprivation can ignite rebellion even within a nation's own borders. Led largely by working-class women, the protest began as a plea for fair pricing and escalated into a confrontation with state authority. Many of these women had family members fighting on the front lines, yet they faced starvation at home as inflation and speculation gutted their livelihoods. Their demands—bread, justice, and recognition—challenged the Confederate government's priorities, suggesting that no ideology can survive if it fails to feed its people. This moment redefined domestic protest: hunger had become a political grievance capable of shaking the foundations of war itself.

Modern Echoes: The Global Bread Riots of the 1970s–2010s

The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the re-emergence of bread riots on a global scale. As developing nations adopted neoliberal reforms encouraged by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, subsidies that once stabilized food prices were dismantled in the name of fiscal discipline. Egypt's "bread riots" of 1977, following the removal of state subsidies, marked the first major uprising of this era. Nearly forty years later, the 2011 Arab Spring repeated the pattern—political frustration

ignited by the rising cost of food and unemployment. Scholars like Soffiantini (2020) and Patel & McMichael (2010) argue that these movements demonstrate the continuity of moral economy logic: when the price of bread exceeds the perceived moral limit, resistance follows.

Elsewhere, similar uprisings—from Tunisia to Haiti—linked hunger to broader demands for dignity and democracy. These were not spontaneous bursts of unrest but rational reactions to the sense that governments had violated the social contract that guarantees subsistence. The crowd’s chant—“khobz, hurriyya, adala igtimaiyya” (“bread, freedom, social justice”)—encapsulated centuries of struggle distilled into three words.

Patterns and Legacy

From pre-industrial Europe to post-colonial Africa, the historical record reveals a consistent rhythm: when rulers manipulate or neglect food systems, rebellion brews. Bread, salt, rice, or tea—the substance hardly matters. What unites these revolts is the shared conviction that the ability to eat should not depend on political obedience. The moral logic of these uprisings persists today in protests over subsidy cuts, wage stagnation, and welfare reform. Hunger remains the most intimate and undeniable measure of inequality, and when it becomes widespread, it does what it always has—it mobilizes.

These historical precedents establish the foundation for understanding modern authoritarian control mechanisms. Just as bread once symbolized the moral bond between rulers and ruled, today’s welfare programs, ration systems, and trade policies

serve as the new battlegrounds for that same negotiation. The question that echoes across time is unchanged: when access to food becomes conditional, rebellion is never far behind.

4. Authoritarian Control Mechanisms

If rebellion grows from hunger, authoritarian control thrives on its careful management. Authoritarian regimes rarely allow hunger to spiral into chaos; they measure, ration, and manipulate it. Food is not simply withheld—it is distributed selectively, designed to reward loyalty and punish dissent. In these systems, sustenance becomes surveillance.

Feeding Obedience: Subsidies and the Social Contract

In many autocratic states, control is not maintained by starvation but by selective generosity. Egypt's long-standing bread subsidy, for example, has functioned as both lifeline and leash. Since the 1950s, Egyptian leaders have subsidized aish baladi—a flatbread whose name literally means "life." When prices rose or subsidies were threatened, riots erupted. Yet, the very dependence on state-provided bread allowed the government to reassert control each time the social contract was tested. As LSE's 2016 Public Policy Review notes, the bread subsidy was never purely economic—it was political theater, a ritual that reinforced the image of the state as provider. Every loaf sold below cost reminded citizens of the regime's paternal hand.

This dynamic extended beyond Egypt. Across much of the Middle East and North Africa, regimes use food subsidies as “pressure valves” to diffuse unrest while deepening dependence. The illusion of benevolence masks a deeper structure of control: the power to give is also the power to take away.

Engineered Starvation: When Food Becomes a Weapon

At the other extreme lies the weaponization of hunger itself. Modern conflicts have shown that starvation can serve as a tactical tool more effective than bullets. In Syria, the Assad regime’s “kneel or starve” sieges systematically cut off food, water, and medical aid to rebel-held cities. Amnesty International (2017) and the Syria Institute (2018) documented entire communities driven to surrender by blockade rather than battle. Similarly, in Yemen, coalition forces restricted fuel and food imports, plunging civilians into what the United Nations later described as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Alex de Waal (2018) argues that such famines are not natural disasters but crimes of calculation. The infrastructures of hunger—ports, storage facilities, grain routes—are controlled, surveilled, and weaponized. Starvation becomes policy, not accident. In this sense, authoritarian food control is not always about feeding or starving, but about orchestrating both at once. It’s the careful modulation of scarcity that sustains power.

The Ration as Regime: Surveillance Through Sustenance

Some regimes manage compliance not by denying food, but by monopolizing its distribution. North Korea offers the most explicit example. Under the songbun system—a hereditary caste-like classification—citizens' food rations are tied to their perceived loyalty to the state. Those with higher songbun receive better quality and more frequent rations, while those deemed politically unreliable face chronic deprivation. International observers have long noted that famine in the 1990s was exacerbated not just by poor harvests but by deliberate exclusion.

Ration cards, distribution centers, and “food loyalty programs” serve as tools of both sustenance and surveillance. Food becomes a political report card, its availability determined not by need but by obedience. These systems generate dependency so profound that rebellion becomes logistically impossible—no one can revolt when their survival is counted, tracked, and issued by the very power they oppose.

Austerity and Authoritarianism in Disguise

While extreme cases like Syria or North Korea are explicit, subtler forms of food control appear in nominally democratic systems. Under the guise of austerity or fiscal responsibility, governments can erode access to food assistance, effectively wielding hunger as social discipline. Scholars such as Patel and McMichael (2010) note that neoliberal reforms often mimic authoritarian control by shifting blame from systems to individuals—portraying hunger as a personal failure rather than a policy outcome.

In the United States, cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the Trump administration reflected this pattern. Justified as cost-saving measures, they disproportionately affected working-class and rural populations—the

same groups politicians claimed to champion. The resulting food insecurity deepened dependence on charitable systems, eroding the idea of food as a right and reframing it as conditional generosity. As with bread in Egypt, dependence on welfare becomes dependence on political will.

The Logic of Scarcity

Across these examples, a shared logic emerges: authoritarian control over food is not only about deprivation—it's about predictability. By defining who receives food, when, and how, regimes create an invisible architecture of obedience. Hunger and relief operate as alternating currents of fear and gratitude.

Food thus functions as both carrot and stick, shaping behavior more effectively than propaganda or punishment. Citizens internalize scarcity, learning to navigate systems of exchange, loyalty, and silence. And once the state becomes the primary source of nourishment, opposition begins to feel not only dangerous—but ungrateful.

5. Rebellion Through Food

If authoritarian power thrives on managing hunger, rebellion begins when people refuse to let that hunger define them. Across history, food has not only symbolized oppression but has also served as the heartbeat of resistance. From bread riots to hunger strikes, communities have continually transformed sustenance into strategy—turning deprivation into a collective declaration of dignity.

Hunger as a Catalyst for Collective Action

Rebellion rarely emerges in abstraction; it begins at the dinner table, when scarcity collides with injustice. When governments ration unfairly or manipulate prices, hunger becomes a unifying language understood across class and culture. Food protests, in this sense, are among the most democratic forms of revolt. They invite participation from those who might never march for ideology but will march for bread.

The 2008 global food crisis illustrated this on a planetary scale. Skyrocketing grain prices—fueled by speculation, biofuel diversion, and export bans—ignited riots in more than thirty countries. Scholars such as Patel and McMichael (2010) argue that these protests were not simply about hunger but about entitlement: the right to affordable food in a global market engineered for profit. In Haiti, Egypt, and Bangladesh, demonstrators framed food access as a moral demand, not a market issue. “We are hungry because of you,” one banner read in Port-au-Prince—addressed not to nature, but to policymakers.

Bread and Freedom: The Arab Spring

The 2011 uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East—collectively known as the Arab Spring—were ignited in part by the price of bread. In Egypt and Tunisia, bread had long been the cornerstone of the state’s social contract. When global grain prices spiked and local subsidies faltered, that contract collapsed. Protest chants intertwined economic and political grievances: “Bread, freedom, social justice.”

Soffiantini (2020) describes these movements as “moral economies in revolt,” a phrase that captures their ethical core. Citizens were not demanding luxury; they were demanding fairness—the assurance that no one should starve while the powerful feast. The uprisings showed how easily food insecurity can expose the fragility of authoritarian stability. When the price of bread exceeds the price of silence, the crowd becomes a political force.

Grassroots Resistance: Food as Solidarity

Not all rebellions against hunger erupt in violence. Some movements resist by feeding rather than fighting. The Food Not Bombs collective, founded in the 1980s, built an international network of activists who recover surplus food and distribute it freely in public spaces. Their slogan—“food is a right, not a privilege”—echoes Sen’s (1981) entitlement theory, translating it into action. By reclaiming discarded food and redistributing it outside market or state control, they transform the act of eating into quiet revolution.

Similarly, modern urban farming cooperatives and mutual aid networks embody resistance through sustenance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, community gardens and free fridges in cities from Detroit to Santiago provided more than calories—they offered autonomy. In a time of institutional paralysis, feeding one another became an assertion of agency. These forms of “micro-rebellion” lack the spectacle of riots but carry the same moral charge: they redefine who gets to provide, who gets to decide, and who gets to survive.

The Hunger Strike: Starvation as Speech

If authoritarianism uses hunger to silence, rebellion sometimes uses hunger to speak. The hunger strike transforms the body into a political instrument, a public negotiation between will and mortality. From Mahatma Gandhi's fasts against colonial rule to the 1981 Irish Republican hunger strikes and the ongoing Palestinian hunger strikes in Israeli prisons, self-imposed starvation functions as moral inversion. The oppressor controls food, yet the resister controls refusal.

Psychologists studying protest behavior (e.g., Jasper & Young, 2024) suggest that hunger strikes are among the most psychologically potent forms of dissent because they weaponize empathy. They force observers—including opponents—to confront suffering not as abstraction but as spectacle. In these moments, starvation ceases to be silence; it becomes argument.

Hunger and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

In the modern era, digital communication has amplified how food protests spread and sustain themselves. During the 2019 Sudanese uprising, videos of women baking bread for protesters became viral symbols of resilience. In Venezuela, citizens organized community food cooperatives when inflation rendered the bolívar meaningless. In the United States, food distribution drives led by labor unions and activists reframed hunger as a symptom of systemic inequality rather than personal failure.

What unites these examples is their redefinition of food from dependency to empowerment. Rebellion through food is not always loud or visible—it often manifests as refusal: refusal to pay inflated prices, to accept corrupted aid, or to let policy dictate survival. Every act of feeding without permission becomes an act of protest.

6. Geopolitics of Grain & Global Supply Chains

In the twenty-first century, the struggle over food has shifted from the village market to the global stage. Nations now wield crops the way they once wielded weapons, and supply chains have replaced borders as the new front lines of power. The politics of food sovereignty—who grows, who trades, and who eats—has become one of the most consequential dimensions of modern geopolitics.

Grain as a Strategic Weapon

Few events illustrate this better than the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Before the 2022 invasion, the two countries supplied nearly 30 percent of the world's wheat exports and more than half of global sunflower oil. When Russia blockaded Ukraine's Black Sea ports, it disrupted a network that fed hundreds of millions across Africa and the Middle East. Prices soared, humanitarian agencies scrambled, and food insecurity deepened from Cairo to Mogadishu. Wegren (2023) describes Russia's manipulation of grain exports as "a modern siege conducted through markets rather than militaries."

When Moscow offered to resume shipments only to "friendly" nations or demanded sanctions relief in exchange for reopening ports, it demonstrated that grain could be used as geopolitical leverage—feeding allies, starving critics. Ukraine,

conversely, framed its agricultural sector as resistance: each harvested field symbolized defiance against occupation. In this war, wheat is narrative, strategy, and sustenance all at once.

The Fragility of the Global Table

The global food system depends on long, intricate chains of production, processing, and transport. This interdependence, while efficient, makes it dangerously fragile. A drought in Argentina, a fertilizer shortage in Belarus, or a shipping bottleneck in the Red Sea can ripple through world markets within days. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these vulnerabilities were laid bare: lockdowns halted labor migration, container shortages stranded crops, and export bans triggered panic buying.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2024), more than 2.4 billion people now experience some form of moderate or severe food insecurity—an increase of nearly 60 percent since 2015. Most of this growth is not caused by scarcity, but by volatility: the sudden swings in price and access that follow geopolitical tension. When energy markets or trade policies shift, so does the ability to eat. In this sense, globalization has not erased the politics of food—it has amplified them.

Climate Change and the New Geography of Hunger

Climate change compounds these pressures by transforming both where and how food can be produced. Droughts, floods, and shifting rainfall patterns are redrawing the world's agricultural map. Regions historically considered breadbaskets—such as the U.S. Midwest, the Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia's delta regions—now face

recurring climate shocks that undermine yields. Meanwhile, nations with water reserves and stable climates are emerging as new centers of food influence.

A 2025 World Food Programme report warns that climate-driven migration will soon create “food refugees” —populations displaced not by war but by the slow violence of uninhabitable farmland. These shifts deepen global inequality: wealthy nations can absorb volatility through imports and subsidies, while poorer countries face famine when one harvest fails. In this context, food sovereignty becomes inseparable from climate policy.

Corporate Concentration and Market Dependency

Beyond states, multinational agribusiness corporations now wield power comparable to governments. Four companies—ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus—control roughly 70 percent of global grain trade. Their decisions about pricing, speculation, and shipping routes influence whether bread is affordable in Lagos or Lima. As Patel (2024) notes, this concentration blurs the line between market and monopoly: “hunger is managed through spreadsheets.”

Financial speculation in food commodities exacerbates this dependency. When hedge funds treat grain futures as investment assets, they detach prices from real harvests, turning hunger into profit. These dynamics ensure that global food politics are not only about scarcity or supply—but about who benefits from volatility.

Food Security as National Security

In response to these risks, nations increasingly frame food policy as national defense. China's "grain self-sufficiency" strategy, India's export controls, and the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy all reflect a shift toward protectionism. The United States, for its part, has re-designated agriculture as "critical infrastructure," acknowledging that cyberattacks or trade disruptions could paralyze supply.

This securitization, however, carries moral cost. When powerful nations stockpile grain or restrict exports to protect their own citizens, vulnerable regions bear the fallout. The logic mirrors earlier imperial hierarchies: the strong hoard, the weak hunger. What was once colonial extraction now reappears as economic nationalism.

Toward a New Global Food Order

The geopolitics of grain reveal that food is both the most basic and the most complex form of diplomacy. As de Waal (2024) writes, "starvation today is not an absence of food, but an excess of politics." Building a stable global food order will require dismantling the systems that treat nourishment as leverage. That means reforming trade agreements, investing in regional resilience, and regulating speculative finance.

It also requires a cultural shift—from food as commodity to food as common good. Until that shift occurs, the world will continue to live under the quiet tyranny of scarcity engineered by policy, profit, and power.

7. Ethical, Legal & Humanitarian Implications

When food becomes a tool of control, the consequences extend far beyond hunger. Each act of deliberate deprivation or selective distribution carries ethical, legal, and humanitarian weight. The question is no longer whether starvation and scarcity are political, but whether the international community is willing—or even able—to treat them as crimes.

The Ethics of Hunger: Between Necessity and Neglect

At its most fundamental level, the ethics of hunger center on responsibility. Who is accountable when people starve in a world that produces enough food for everyone? De Waal (2018) describes famine as “an atrocity of inaction”—a result of policy failure, not natural disaster. This framing forces a shift in moral language: hunger is not unfortunate, it is unacceptable.

Modern famines in Yemen, Tigray, and Gaza underscore this point. Each has been characterized not by crop failure but by deliberate obstruction—blockades, sanctions, or siege tactics that weaponize supply chains. The humanitarian principle of neutrality is tested in these crises. Aid organizations often face impossible choices: negotiate with perpetrators to deliver food or uphold principles of non-cooperation and risk watching civilians die. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2024) recently called this the “moral paradox of aid”—the dilemma between access and complicity.

Starvation as a War Crime

The legal landscape surrounding food and conflict has evolved rapidly. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) established a clear precedent by recognizing the use of starvation as a method of warfare as a potential war crime. This resolution was not merely symbolic—it marked the first time the Security Council explicitly linked food security to international peace. Subsequent investigations by the UN and humanitarian tribunals have begun documenting siege tactics and aid blockades as prosecutable offenses under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The ICC's 2024 report on Sudan's Darfur region, for instance, categorized intentional food denial as an "attack on civilian survival systems." Similarly, in Ukraine, the targeting of grain infrastructure has raised new debates about whether economic starvation—indirect but devastating—can meet the threshold of war crime. The law, once focused on physical violence, is now grappling with the quieter violence of deprivation.

Food Aid, Dependency, and the Ethics of Intervention

Humanitarian intervention itself is ethically fraught. Food aid, while life-saving, can entrench dependency and distort local economies. Decades of well-intentioned foreign assistance have sometimes undermined smallholder farmers, flooded markets with subsidized imports, or reinforced political hierarchies by routing aid through authoritarian intermediaries.

Critics such as Patel (2024) and Mousseau (2023) argue that the global aid industry must confront its own complicity in reproducing inequality. When assistance becomes a form of soft diplomacy, it risks mirroring the same coercive patterns it seeks to dismantle. The ethics of feeding, therefore, require humility: to relieve hunger without erasing autonomy, and to rebuild entitlement without replacing it with dependency.

The Humanitarian Dilemma: Neutrality vs. Justice

For humanitarian workers on the ground, the tension between neutrality and justice remains unresolved. Providing food in conflict zones demands negotiation with those who cause starvation. Refusing to engage may preserve moral integrity but costs lives. Engaging may save lives but legitimizes the oppressor.

Recent scholarship suggests that humanitarian organizations are beginning to adopt a “principled pragmatism”—prioritizing outcomes over appearances (Slim & Bradley, 2024). The goal is not to abandon neutrality, but to redefine it: to act impartially without becoming indifferent. In practice, that means documenting abuses even while delivering aid, and recognizing that silence in the face of engineered famine is itself a political stance.

Domestic Ethics: Food Policy as Social Justice

The ethics of hunger also extend into domestic policy. In democracies, food insecurity may not arise from siege, but it still reflects structures of neglect. The reduction of social programs like the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) reveals how economic policy can inflict slow violence under the guise of fiscal

discipline. Studies by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2024) show that even modest benefit cuts correlate with measurable increases in child malnutrition and long-term health costs.

When governments make moral judgments about who “deserves” to eat, they move from governance into coercion. The ethical principle of food as a human right, enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stands in direct contrast to such conditionality. Yet this contradiction persists—from welfare policy in Washington to rationing systems in Pyongyang—because hunger remains politically useful.

Toward a Framework of Food Justice

To address these dilemmas, scholars and policymakers increasingly advocate for a framework of food justice—a synthesis of human rights law, ethical responsibility, and environmental sustainability. This framework rejects the charity model of feeding and replaces it with the justice model of entitlement. It asserts that no society can claim legitimacy while allowing systemic hunger, and that no leader should escape accountability for engineering it.

As philosopher Paul Thompson (2025) writes, “Ethics begins when we admit that hunger is never neutral.” That acknowledgment transforms the politics of food from an issue of charity into an issue of conscience.

8. Synthesis & Policy Recommendations

The history of food politics reveals a painful continuity: every era invents new ways to disguise old hungers. Whether through colonial taxes, rationing systems, or modern welfare reform, the mechanisms differ, but the outcome remains consistent—access to food defines power. The preceding chapters have shown how food serves simultaneously as instrument and symbol, shaping obedience and resistance alike. It is the invisible infrastructure beneath every political order.

Connecting the Threads

Three themes emerge from this analysis. First, entitlement: hunger is rarely a failure of production, but of access. Governments and markets regulate not just what is available but who is allowed to obtain it.

Second, morality: people tolerate hardship but rebel when deprivation violates their sense of justice. The cry for bread, whether in 1789 Paris or 2011 Cairo, is a demand for fairness as much as sustenance.

Third, accountability: starvation is not inevitable. It is constructed, maintained, and often rationalized under policy language—“austerity,” “sanctions,” “security.” Recognizing hunger as design, rather than destiny, transforms it from tragedy to ethical failure.

Together these insights call for a re-imagining of global and domestic food governance—one that treats nourishment as a right, not a reward.

1. Reframing Food as a Human Right

International law already gestures toward this principle. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the right to food, yet enforcement remains weak. Expanding that language into binding frameworks—through the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food—would convert moral aspiration into legal duty. Governments should be held accountable not only for deliberate starvation in conflict but also for policy decisions that predictably produce hunger.

2. Depoliticizing Food Assistance

At the domestic level, food aid must be stripped of moral judgment. Programs like SNAP in the United States or bread subsidies in Egypt succeed only when they are insulated from partisan manipulation. Embedding automatic stabilizers—benefits that adjust with inflation and economic downturns—can prevent political exploitation. Transparency in eligibility criteria and digital oversight can further reduce the temptation to use assistance as electoral leverage.

3. Strengthening Humanitarian Law

The recognition of starvation as a war crime under UN Resolution 2417 must evolve into enforcement. The International Criminal Court should establish a dedicated unit to investigate and prosecute cases of food denial, with jurisdiction extending to economic blockades and siege tactics. Aid organizations, in turn, must integrate real-time documentation tools to trace intentional disruption of supply chains. Evidence of

deliberate famine should trigger immediate sanctions and referral to the ICC, rather than years of diplomatic paralysis.

4. Building Resilient Regional Food Systems

Globalization has made the food system efficient but brittle. The pandemic, the Ukraine war, and climate disruptions all exposed the peril of over-concentration in global trade. Regional self-sufficiency programs—such as the African Continental Free Trade Area’s food corridors or Latin America’s agro-ecological cooperatives—offer a model of distributed resilience. Investment in local storage, climate-adapted crops, and cooperative ownership reduces dependence on both autocratic regimes and volatile markets.

5. Regulating Speculation and Corporate Concentration

Markets designed for profit cannot guarantee survival. International regulation of commodity speculation is essential to prevent financial institutions from inflating food prices beyond what production justifies. Antitrust measures targeting the “ABCD” grain conglomerates—Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus—could reduce monopolistic control over trade routes and pricing. Transparency mandates requiring corporations to disclose grain reserves and contracts would limit the ability to weaponize scarcity.

6. Integrating Climate Policy with Food Security

Climate adaptation must be treated as integral to food governance. Policies addressing emissions, water management, and soil restoration are, in practice, hunger prevention strategies. Wealthier nations should allocate a portion of their climate-finance commitments directly to global food-security initiatives, recognizing that ecological instability and political instability are now inseparable.

7. Empowering Civil Society and Local Agency

Rebellion through food need not end in chaos—it can evolve into constructive policy pressure. Governments and international organizations should institutionalize channels for grassroots input: urban agriculture networks, mutual-aid groups, and local food councils. These initiatives embody “democratic feeding”—systems in which citizens share power over production and distribution rather than depending solely on the state or the market.

Toward an Ethic of Sustenance

The synthesis of these policies points toward a simple but radical ethic: that the right to eat should not depend on obedience. Whether in a refugee camp, a grocery line, or a global commodities exchange, food should never be contingent upon allegiance, ideology, or wealth. Implementing this vision requires more than reform—it requires imagination.

As Gandhi’s march for salt, the bread riots of Cairo, and the hunger strikes of modern activists remind us, rebellion begins wherever people reclaim the means to

nourish themselves. True stability, whether for nations or individuals, comes not from controlling food, but from ensuring that no one can weaponize it again.

9. Conclusion

Every society writes its story through food. Who eats, who hungers, and who decides between the two form the quiet architecture of power that outlasts governments and wars. From the bread riots of the eighteenth century to the blockades of the twenty-first, food has remained the most basic expression of politics—its absence, the loudest protest of all.

The evidence traced across this study reveals an unbroken thread: hunger is almost never accidental. It is produced, directed, and sustained through systems of entitlement and exclusion that convert nourishment into leverage. Authoritarian regimes wield scarcity like a scalpel, cutting away resistance without drawing attention to the wound. Democracies, meanwhile, often use policy rather than force—tightening eligibility, restructuring welfare, and calling it reform. The methods differ, but the logic is familiar: control the plate, and you control the person.

Yet, history also shows that this control is never absolute. Each attempt to weaponize hunger eventually gives rise to its opposite—the moral insistence that feeding is a right, not a privilege. From Gandhi's salt harvest to the chants for "bread and freedom" in Tahrir Square, rebellion has always begun with the simplest truth: that no power is legitimate if it governs through hunger. In every era, food has reminded the oppressed that survival itself can be an act of defiance.

The geopolitics of grain and the ethics of hunger explored in these pages make clear that the question before us is not only economic or legal, but existential. How we feed one another will determine what kind of world we live in—and what kind of world we leave behind. The right to food must therefore be understood not as an aspiration, but as an obligation; not as charity, but as justice.

To depoliticize food is to humanize power. It is to reject the centuries-old calculus that treats hunger as an acceptable cost of governance or profit. And it is to acknowledge that stability built on deprivation is no stability at all. Whether through law, policy, or collective action, the path forward requires reimagining sustenance as the foundation of freedom itself.

If control over food is control over life, then ensuring access to it—freely, fairly, and without condition—is the most radical form of liberation left to us.

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